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THE DANDY OF THE MINES;
OR,
The Crimson Trail of the Avenger.

By NED BUNTLIN.

CHAPTER I.
THE CASINO.

The Great Timbuctoo Gulch, on the Yuba, was filled with miners, gamblers, and adventurers.

During the day most of the miners were at work, and while they were thus engaged the gamblers and despera-

"BRUTES! COWARD BRUTES! FALL BACK!" SHE CRIED. "TWENTY OF YOU UPON TWO MEN! BACK, DOGS, BACK!"

does were asleep, for their nefarious occupations kept them up all night.

Night, then, was the time when the "wild life" of the place was in full play.

In the center of the settlement of huts, tents, and slab shanties, which gained the name of Timbuctoo, there stood a large, one-storied frame-building, known as the Casino. It combined beneath its roof almost every means of temptation and every species of vice. Its floor had been many a time stained with blood, even in the brief time it had been standing. Every kind of gambling was carried on there—it had its band of music and its alluring nymphs for the dance—a bar, where all kinds of liquor was sold, and a lunch-table, where food could be had by those who had the coin or dust to pay for it.

Gambling, drinking, and dancing were the chief allurements of the place. And now to our story.

The relay season had just set in, and the miners were wild with joy at the consequent increase of their profits, when water became plenty. The Casino was unusually crowded.

The most of the men in the place had gathered there, for the proprietor had announced a new attraction. A beautiful woman, just from the States, was to make her *debut* as a singer. A large painted banner had hung for two days across the street, announcing that "La Belle Oreana"—of course an assumed name—the greatest singer of the age, and the most beautiful woman then on the Pacific coast, would appear in ballad and operatic gems for seven nights only.

It was just ten o'clock when a curtain was drawn aside from the rear of the music stand, where a small dressing-room had been arranged, and the stranger made her appearance.

All was noise and bustle when the curtain was drawn—loud talk, laughing and cursing, the chink of coin, and the clatter of glasses—but in a second after you might have heard a pin drop on the floor.

For she was more than beautiful. She was like an angel hovering above fiends in that place. Faultless in feature, exquisite in form, dressed in snowy white, her dark hazel eyes seemed to speak before her rich red lips opened in song.

Breathless and silent, even the gamblers, dropping cards and dice, every man and woman in the room stood and gazed at her as she stepped to the front of the platform.

Then, in a voice which seemed low, but which swelled in a flood of harmony till it filled all the room, she sang "Home, Sweet Home" as no one there had ever heard it sung before.

Not until the last word left her lips could another sound be heard, nor a motion of head, hand, or foot be detected. Her auditors scarcely seemed to breathe. She finished, and turned to retire.

Then rose a shout which made the house tremble from floor-joists to rafters—a universal cheer, which was deafening. Hands clapped and feet stamped, and it seemed as if the people forgot everything but the singer and her song. She had vanished behind the curtain, but the cheers rose and rose until the proprietor was obliged to go and lead her out before them.

She came, not in the way one used to appearing before the public would come—she came at first white-faced and trembling, as if more frightened than gratified at such boisterous applause. Then the color rushed in a flood over brow and cheeks, making her more than ever beautiful.

She bowed, and would have retired—but "encore—sing again," and with these words a perfect shower of nuggets of gold, pieces of coin, and even bags of dust thrown at her feet, forced her to remain and bow her assent to the wishes of the multitude.

She chose the touching and beautiful song written by Burns, commencing:

"The gloomy night is gath'ring fast,"

and sang it with such pathos that again the audience went almost wild with delight. Gifts were literally heaped up at her feet, and a third time she was obliged to sing before the crowd would even allow a rest.

"Who is she? Where did she come from? Is she maid, wife, or widow?"

These were only a few of the questions poured upon the proprietor of the Casino after the lady had retired.

He had but one answer to all. He did not know. The lady, with a little boy, not more than four or five years old, had come to the cabin where he dwelt, just in the rear of the Casino, told him she was a good singer, and wanted an engagement. She had told him to select a stage name, refusing to give her own. Struck with her beauty, her gentility, and lady-like manner, he had given up his cabin to her, and taken his own bed in a corner of the Casino.

A gambler, giant in stature, rude and desperate in character, known as Bully Hank, listened to this statement with a sneering smile on his coarse, sensual face, and said:

"I'll bet twenty ounces she is my property inside of four-and-twenty hours! Who dares take the bet? Twenty ounces up for a bid—who talks?"

"What is the bet?" asked a man who entered the door as the huge gambler roared out the challenge.

"We've had an angel in petticoats here, singing the boys crazy. She is the handsomest bit of flesh and blood you ever saw, Dandy Joe, and I'll bet twenty ounces I win her inside of twenty-four hours!"

"You may for all I care—women are nothing to me!" said the man, and he walked carelessly over to a montable, where the game had taken a fresh start.

The gambler looked at him as he passed on, and muttered, in a contemptuous tone:

"That's Wrestling Joe, the Dandy of the Mines. They say he can lay the best of these chaps on their backs. But he hasn't tried me, and he had better not."

The man of whom he spoke was not above the medium height, but in form was lithe and graceful. He was dressed better than any of those around, yet in a peculiar fashion of his own. His coat, a short frock, was of black velvet, with a gold cord in the seams. His shirt white, with ruffles at bosom and wristband. His pantaloons were a light blue, and fitted down over a faultless boot. He wore a jaunty velvet cap above his jet black hair, which curled glossily about his well shaped head. He seemed old enough to have a beard, but his face was smooth and rosy as that of a country lass. His eyes were of a deep blue—his features expressive, and his general look intelligent.

In size and in apparent strength he did not look as if he could stand before such a giant as Bully Hank for a single second.

The games went on, the band struck up a lively waltz, but no dancers went out on the floor. A comic singer appeared, one who had been a favorite before, and with all his grimace and in his best voice failed to elicit any applause. The crowd were evidently waiting for the new star in that firmament.

Not long would they wait. A single voice, it was that of Bully Hank, shouted "Oreana." The cry was taken up, and louder and louder it rang till the proprietor saw no denial would be accepted.

Every game stopped as before the moment the curtain was drawn.

The lady came forward, and this time her song was a plaintive lay, a romance, it might be termed, of the olden time. It brought, as before, a rapturous encore, then the lady sung the exquisite song of Byron:

"Remind me not, remind me not
Of those beloved, those vanished hours,
When all my soul was given to thee—
Hours that may never be forgot,
Till time unnerves our vital powers
And thou and I shall cease to be."

The crowd were as usual breathless while she sung, but the moment she stopped, while their applause rung loud and high, Bully Hank shouted out:

"She's my gal for a thousand dollars. I'll have a kiss now to prove it!"

He advanced toward the platform as he spoke, having to pass the spot where Wrestling Joe had stood as if wrapped in a dream, gazing at her face, his own counte-

nance as white as if he had been stricken with a death chill.

"Stop!" said Joe, in a low, distinct tone, and he laid his small white hand on the arm of the burly giant. "Where are you going?"

"To kiss that woman," cried the gambler. "And I'd like to see a cuss of your size try to stop me."

"Dog! Offer to profane that angel by a touch, or to breathe her name but in respect, and I'll break every bone in your body!"

Low was the tone in which these words were uttered, but they reached the ears of that woman on the platform. Her eyes dropped on the speaker—a ghastly pallor came over her face, she gasped out some inarticulate name, and fell fainting in the arms of the proprietor, who bore her back to her dressing-room.

There would have been great excitement about this had not a new cause of interest sprung up. A fight was on the tapis. For the huge gambler turning on Wrestling Joe shouted wildly:

"Who do you call dog, you dandified whelp? Make your will quick, for I'll shake what little life there is in you out in less than a minute by the watch!"

Joe laughed scornfully and stepped between the gambler and the stage.

With a howl of anger, gnashing his teeth as if he would crunch his enemy between his jaws, the giant sprang at his antagonist.

The next instant, how, neither he nor those who saw it done could tell, his heels flew up and his head came down with terrific force on the floor.

Wrestling Joe had tripped him—that was certain, for he stood laughing close by his side when he fell.

The giant staggered to his feet.

"I slipped and fell!" he shouted. "I'll bet twenty ounces to one that I'll throw that little cuss any holt he likes!"

"Plank your dust! Let Tom Halliday hold the stakes!" said Wrestling Joe, as quietly as if he was speaking to a child.

He placed a doubloon in the hands of a miner—the man he named.

"A ring, form a ring!" shouted twenty men at once.

The ring was formed by men clasping hands, and the two men, throwing off their upper garments, in another moment entered it.

The disparity in size between the two was such that not a man in that room believed it could end in victory for Wrestling Joe. In weight Hank was greatly his superior. Joe stood not over five feet eight inches, while the other was six feet six—all bone and muscle at that.

"Pay forfeit and let him crow, little un!" cried a miner. "I'll go halves in the loss. It is a shame to put such a boy against a mammoth."

"Let him crow after he wins—not before!" said Wrestling Joe, firmly.

"Choose your holt—cuss you, choose your holt!" cried the gambler, angrily. "I'm dyin' to get one squeeze on you!"

"Take the first hold you can get, and be quick about it—I'm in a hurry!" said the young wrestler.

The giant gave one black look of hate, and rushing on him with outstretched arms, seemed about to crush him out of existence.

One instant—not a second did it seem—their bodies appeared to meet, and the giant was thrown bodily up in the air, and his head came crashing down on the floor with a force which shook the house from the roof to the ground.

The blood gushed from his nose and mouth, and he lay quivering where he fell.

"Who crows now?" asked Wrestling Joe, in the same low voice.

His answer was a universal shout from one end of the room to the other:

"Joe has won—Joe has won!"

"Maybe he'll try again!" said Joe.

Bully Hank did not try again. His second fall so completely disabled him that a couple of his gambling pals had to help him off to his shanty, while the stake-holder transferred his dust to Wrestling Joe.

The latter put the gold in his pocket, and then, for the

first time, exhibited some agitation, when he asked the proprietor of the Casino where the lady was.

"She has gone for the night," said the latter. "She seemed to know you'd inquire after her, for she wrote something on this bit of paper, and told me to hand it to you."

Wrestling Joe took the note and every vestige of color left his face when he read it. The words were few but strange:

"Remember your oath! You must seek no interview with me—attempt to hold no intercourse. I did not know you were here or I should not have come. As soon as I have means to go with I will leave this land altogether. Once more, and forever, farewell."

"TONE."

"Oh, Heaven!" he gasped. "So near and yet so far apart! At least I can shield her from peril."

He said no more, but slowly walked from the room, silent and sad.

The proprietor now turned to the music-stand, and announcing there would be no more singing that night made the band strike up a dance.

CHAPTER II.

"HE LOVES ME STILL."

It was a dingy little cabin in the rear of the great, barn-like Casino, to which, wrapped in her hooded mantle, the beautiful singer hurried as soon as she left the dressing-room behind the stage. It had but one room, and a cot-bed, a small stove, a table, a single chair, and her trunk, almost filled it.

The woman had not been inside more than a minute or two when the man known as Wrestling Joe approached the cabin with a step so light that it could not be heard above the pattering rain and moaning wind.

He approached the window, and through a broken pane inserted the point of a stiletto, so as to move the curtain slightly aside. Then, scarcely breathing, he peered within.

The woman had cast aside her mantle, and was kneeling by the bedside, looking on the face of a sleeping boy—a beautiful child of not over five or six years. Its hair of glossy brown curled around a face almost angelic in its soft beauty.

Two round, chubby arms were crossed on its breast, and the dimpled hands were clasped as if it had gone to sleep praying.

"Heaven guard thee, my Indice!" murmured the young mother. "Heaven shield thee, my son! for it is a cold, a fearful world in which thy lot is cast. I have learned how I may support thee; but, oh! what dangers must now surround me amid the rude and lawless throng whom I must please that the needed gold may be accumulated!"

She sighed, pressed a kiss upon his white forehead, and rose.

The touch of her lips awakened him. He opened eyes not dark as hers, but blue as a cloudless sky in summer, and smiled. He saw who it was, murmured, "Mamma," and slept again.

"A harvest!" murmured the woman, going to the table whereon she had laid the tributes cast at her feet that night by the enthusiastic audience.

Bags of dust, nuggets of solid gold, a handful of gold and silver coin—there it lay, all her own.

"There must be a good deal of value in all this!" she said, as she examined the treasure; "it will not take me long, if I live, to gather enough to bear me to a far-off land, where I and my poor child can find peace and rest. It is all I ask. And he is here? He loves me still! His wild, pleading look went to my very soul—but we must not meet. We separated for all time—ay, and for eternity!"

A sigh—a low, moaning gust of grief from the depths of the heart, reached her ears—she turned toward the window, she saw the raised corner of the curtain drop, and she knew a listener was there.

In an instant the light on the table was extinguished by her, and she stood in breathless silence to listen.

Once more a sigh, which seemed to float from a wave of bitter agony, reached her ear, then she heard footsteps, growing fainter and fainter, until the sound died away.

"It was he. Once my husband—the father of Indice, my boy. The father who will know his child no more—the husband who will not know his wife again."

A sob broke from her lips, while in the darkness she disrobed, knelt down beside the bed, and breathed a whispered prayer, then crept beneath the covering to the side of her sleeping child.

To sleep? Alas, no, but to tremble at the sounds of dissipated revelry rising louder and louder as the night went on, in the place which she had hushed to silence by the magic power of her voice in song.

Wrestling Joe knew, when that light was so suddenly extinguished, that his vicinity was known, and with a single sigh he departed from the cabin as noiselessly as he came, returning to the Casino.

He passed in and down the hall, threading his way among the dancers, until he reached the bar. Here he called for the best brandy, and when a bottle and glass were set before him, filled the latter to the brim, and drank it off undiluted.

He then went to a seat in the corner, bowed his head between his hands upon an unoccupied table, and there remained motionless for a long time.

Two men, they were the gamblers who had helped Bully Hank to his cabin, came in and sat down at a table within a yard of Joe, and bade a girl bring them a pack of cards and a bottle of whisky.

They commenced drinking and playing, and talked as their game went on.

"Hank got rough handling for one of his size," said one.

"Yes, he is badly used up. But he'll have satisfaction. If the dandy has got anything to leave he may as well make his will. As to the woman who caused the fuss, she may as well come under at once and move into Hank's cabin. When he says he'll own anything, be it horse, dog, or woman, it's as good as bought and paid for. And he has sworn to possess her. If he wasn't so badly hurt I guess she'd hear from him to-night, for he is madder than I ever saw him get before."

Not a motion betrayed that Wrestling Joe had heard these remarks, but not a word had escaped him.

The two men became excited in their game, their talk turned upon that, and when Joe rose and moved to the bar once more they did not observe him, nor were they aware that he had been near them while they talked.

"You are not going to drink again, Joe, are you?" said the barkeeper, as the former approached.

"No, no. I am calm now. I have heard that which will keep me from drinking any more at present. I have work to do, and I may need your help."

"Anything Fred Bellows can do for you will be done, you know, Joe."

"Yes, I believe it. You take or have to take almost everything that is offered here for drinks when the fellows who come are out of money or dust, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have clothes of various kinds, enough for almost any kind of disguise?"

"Yes, my room is half full of all sorts of duds."

"I shall need some of them. I shall have to use more than one disguise to carry out my plans. That cowardly bully intends to have me killed, but that is the smallest evil he contemplates. I will foil him in all his fiendish aims, and if he crosses my path it will be once too often for him!"

"Well, be on your guard, my dear fellow, and depend on me for all that I can do."

Wrestling Joe turned away from the bar with a smile on his face, looking once more like the careless, jolly, whole-souled fellow he generally seemed to be, and as he did so he was spoken to by one of the sirens of the place, a girl whose beauty was already marred by the ravages of drink.

"Going to dance with me, Joe?" she asked. "Come—I haven't had a decent partner to-night, and I want to dance once with a gentleman before I get too top-heavy to behave myself."

"I do not care to dance, Emma," said Joe, kindly. "If I did I would dance with you, for there is no one on the floor can waltz so well."

"Thank you, Beauty, though I know it is true. It did

me good to see you topple that big brute Bully Hank over the way you did. He struck me in the mouth once, and may I die if I'll forget it. I wish you had broken his neck."

"Hush, Emma—speak low—this room is full of his friends."

"Friends to his money—not to him!" said the girl, with a toss of her ringlets. "If you don't dance you'll treat, will you not, Joe?"

"To lemonade, Emma—not to anything stronger for you. I am not your enemy, and he is who offers you wine or brandy."

"I've got a heap of enemies, then," she said, with a wild laugh. "You are the only man in all this crowd who'd dare to say lemonade to me. They all ask me to drink, and I drink till I forget what I once was and what I now am. I'd go raving mad if I didn't. But I'll drink lemonade to please you, Joe. I like you, and all the women like you, and I don't see why either. You never make love to any of us. But you never stand still and see us abused. I reckon that is why we like you."

Thus chatting, the woman, who was a fair complexioned girl, shapely in form and well featured, not more than twenty years of age, reached the bar and called for the lemonade as proposed by Joe.

"What are you supping dish-water for when there's brandy to be had?" cried a rough, red-faced man with a tumbler full of whisky in his hand. "This is the stuff to make a poor man rich!" and he drank off the fiery liquid.

"The stuff to make a rich man poor, you mean," said Joe, quietly taking up the lemonade he had called for, as well as the girl.

"Who told you to put your lip in? I was talking to her!" said the man, with a sneer. "You think you're somebody because you wear a ruffled shirt, but I can swab the room with that curly head of yours, and will if you say Jack Robinson twice!"

"Lay a finger on him and I'll scratch your two eyes into one, you big loafer!" cried the girl, who felt the effect of other drinks more potent than lemonade.

The ruffian, with a bitter curse on his lips, raised his open hand to strike her, but with a single step Wrestling Joe reached his side, caught the descending hand at the wrist, and with a single wrench twisted it out of joint.

With a howl of rage and agony the man drew a pistol from his belt with his left hand, but it was snatched away by his antagonist before he could raise it.

"Keep that weapon, Fred, till that chap knows better than to offer to strike a girl, then give it back to him," said Joe, with a pleasant smile, handing the pistol to Fred.

"I'll murder you for this; I will by all that's holy!" shouted the man.

"Threatened dogs live the longest," said Joe, with a laugh. "Keep your temper, or you'll spoil. You are in a bad climate, for angry folks! I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll hurt you, though, when you don't know who is around!" muttered the man, as he strode away to look for some one to get his wrist in joint again.

"Joe, this is another scrape for protecting women," said Fred Bellows. "That fellow is an Australian convict, and I believe a murderer now. You must be on your guard. Keep his pistol yourself."

"No—I have a pair of my own that I understand better. Do not fear my death from such a hound as that fellow!"

"Joe, I wish I were dead!"

It was Emma who spoke, and her blue eyes filled with tears.

No one but Joe seemed to notice her, for the games, and dance, and drinking were going on all around.

He stood near her, and tried to speak words of comfort.

"It is no use!" she sobbed. "I have gone to the bad—I am on the tide and must sink in it!"

"Would you not leave this life and go home to your mother if the means were provided?" asked Joe.

"Home to my mother? Yes, if I knew I could die the minute I got there. If I could die before a reproach from her dear lips could reach my ear. Oh, Joe, I know you mean kindly. But I say again—it is of no use. I am down and can never rise. I am a woman. When she falls the hands of all the world are uplifted against her. Were I but a man, a murderer, a gambler, or a thief, with

as much gold as Bully Hank has got, I could go home with a diamond on my breast, another on my finger, and run for Congress. My money would elect me, put me in good society, and all that. I am a woman, and I am lost!" Joe could not reply to this—it was too true.

CHAPTER III.

LAUGHED AT AND DEFIED.

In a cabin considerably larger than any around it, and more pretentiously furnished, Hank the Bully, or Henry Champe—for the last was his real name—was slowly recovering from the effects of the terrific fall which he had received at the hands of Wrestling Joe a few hours before. A man whom he called doctor, though he looked more like a butcher, had been for some time administering stimulants, and bathing his swollen head and neck, while four or five ruffianly looking men, with knives and pistols in their belts, hung about, very frequently imbibing large draughts of whisky from a demijohn on a table near the bed.

In a distant corner sat a young girl, very pale and silent. She was, even in her pallid sorrow, very beautiful, and one could hardly realize that she could be a victim to the huge giant wretch who groaned with pain under the doctor's ministrations.

"What time is it?" asked the bruised giant. "Mag, where's my watch?"

"Here, sir, in the drawer. It is two o'clock in the morning," said the girl, in a low, tremulous tone.

"Ten thousand curses!—It was not more than ten when I was hurt. Have I been helpless for four hours to give that wretch time to get away?"

"Who do you mean?" asked one of the gamblers, putting down his empty glass. "Wrestling Joe?"

"Of course—who else could I mean, you fool? He'll not stay in these diggings when I'm able to be about."

"Don't you trust to that, Hank. He isn't afraid of any man that travels."

"Well, I'll give a thousand dollars for his head," said the gambler, husky with pain and rage.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What I say. I didn't speak in Dutch or Choctaw, did I?"

"Why, no—'twas plain English. Did you mean his head clear of his body?"

"Yes; I'd stick it on the highest pole that grows on the banks of Yuba, to show other fools what comes of playing with me."

"Guarantee us safe, and we'll put him where nobody but Satan can find him," said one of three who had been talking apart.

"When? To-night? Or, before daylight, I mean?"

"Yes; if you'll pay for the job and guarantee us safe from the Vigilantes."

"Good! I'll do it. A thousand apiece for you three, and a guarantee besides. I'm on the committee myself, you all know."

"Good—he'll never see sunrise. Let's fire up with three or four drinks, put fresh caps on the barkers, and be off," cried the spokesman of the three.

"Mag—where's Mag? Curse the white-faced fool, she is never around when I want her."

"What do you want? Can't I get it for you?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, I s'pose so; but she knows where I keep it. There's some old Otard brandy in one of the closets—a pint of it is worth a gallon of that Bourbon when one wants nerving up."

The doctor hunted the closets through and soon found the brandy. A bottle had just been opened when the girl came in. Her face was not pale now, but a high color seemed to flush it.

"Where have you been, you she-cat?" asked the gambler, brutally.

"Down to the creek to wash my face in the cold, running water. I was so sleepy I couldn't keep awake, sitting here," replied the girl.

"Next time you want to go out ask me, before you stir, or I'll spoil that baby-face of yours," said the huge brute, angrily.

Then turning to the trio of would-be murderers he said: "Fill up with that brandy, boys—fill your glasses full. It is as mellow as sunlight, but as strong as corked lightning. Fill up, and when that bottle is empty you'll be ready for work. You'll find it easy enough. He'll slip into a quarrel without your half trying. Just insult some woman, and he'll take her part. Then let him have steel or cold lead—the first that comes handiest. Do the job, and come back for your pay. We'll crack another bottle then."

There was a strange smile on the face of the young girl as she took her seat in the corner, far different from the hopeless look of misery she had worn before going out. But Bully Hank and his companions did not notice it. They were too busy with the choice liquor which the doctor had just uncorked.

Until the bottle was empty their libations were constant, and its effect was soon seen in their boastful remarks.

Each looked to the two revolvers which he carried in his belt and put fresh caps on the nipples, so there would be no missing fire when they were ready to use the deadly weapons.

"Are you all ready, boys?" said the leader of the three. "If so come ahead. We'll soon send Wrestling Joe where fuel is cheaper than it is here on the Yuba."

"Please, good gentlemen, give a poor old man a little food and drink?"

An old man, standing in the door way of the cabin, who must have heard what had just been said, made this application in a weak and tremulous tone.

"Mag, give the poor old man a plate of bread and meat and a glass of whisky. I'm a mean cuss in most things, but not mean enough to turn a beggar hungry from my door."

The three men passed out, and the beggar came in when Hank Champe said this.

Stooping with the weakness of extreme age, his white hair scattered over the ragged and threadbare cloak he wore, his face almost hidden in a tangled white beard, the old man advanced slowly to the table where Maggie placed a chair for him. His eyes were bright and piercing, but his steps, like his voice, spoke of extreme weakness.

The young girl hastened to place bread, meat, and drink before the old man, expressing the pity she felt for him.

His keen eyes looked strangely bright, and beamed kindly on her when she spoke, and he seemed about to say something when the sound of hurried footsteps were heard. A few seconds later the three gamblers who had gone out to play the role of assassins rushed in.

"The game is gone!" cried the leader. "He got wind of what was coming and left!"

"How did he hear of it?" asked Hank, black with anger.

"Ask her! She was seen to come in and whisper to him, and in a minute both were out of sight."

The gambler pointed to the girl Maggie.

For an instant she turned pale and trembled, then the color came back to her face.

"You need not ask me!" she cried, and her slender form rose to its fullest height. "I will tell, without a question. You were going to send three men to murder a man you dared not meet yourself. That man once stood between you and me when you threatened to beat me to death. He saved me then, and I have saved him now."

"Hand me a pistol. I'll kill her with my own hand!" shrieked the infuriated gambler.

One of the wretches walked across the room with his pistol outstretched to hand to his master.

Two were between the table where the beggar sat and the door.

The girl stood close by the old man, and as the gambler passed him the former rose, dashed off his cloak, wig, and beard, and in a voice which rang bugle-like through the room, shouted:

"Dastards all! Wrestling Joe laughs at and defies you! Come, Maggie, come!"

The next instant the lamp was kicked from the table, two heavy falls were heard, then all was still except the shouts of Champe and the ruffian near him, who cried out:

"Stab him and her! Shoot 'em down! Don't let them escape!"

There was no answer—all was dark and still between them and the door.

"Doctor, strike a light!" cried Hank, in a state of fearful excitement. "I believe the cuss is here ready to stab me! Strike a light quick, or I'll be the death of you!"

The doctor carried matches, and soon a blaze illumined the apartment. When the lamp was once more alight the two ruffians who had stood near the door were seen senseless on the floor, where two sudden and terribly well-planted blows had laid them.

The disguise which had been worn by Wrestling Joe lay near the table, but he and the girl were both gone.

"I'll give twenty thousand dollars for 'em both, dead or alive!" shouted Champe. "If I can catch 'em I'll skin her alive and burn him over a slow fire."

The two gamblers who had been knocked down soon recovered, but rose half stupefied with the force of the blows which had felled them.

"Get lanterns. Turn out every friend I've got in the search. Hunt high and hunt low till they're found," cried Champe. "I'll have revenge for this night's work if it costs every dollar I'm worth in the world. That white-faced girl once before nearly cost me my life. Her brother's pistol missed fire when its muzzle was in my face. And if mine hadn't gone off taking the top of his head clear as it went 'twould have been the last of me. Put out, every one of you, but the doctor, in search, and start others on the track!"

"He may come in here again, and you're not fit for a fight," said the doctor.

"That's true. Give me my pistols, and you, Jed Williamson—you stay here with me. If he comes we two can fix him, I reckon."

The other two men hurried out, and soon the increasing outdoor noise told the gambler, as he sat by the window, that his offer of twenty thousand dollars had reached the ears of the desperadoes assembled in the Casino, of whom there were enough, separate and apart from the honest miners, to do almost any deed of evil.

CHAPTER IV.

MAGGIE'S RESCUE.

Maggie had barely time to gasp a word of surprise as she saw the disguise cast aside by the supposed decrepit beggar, when she heard the two terrible blows which felled the gamblers out of their way, and felt herself lifted as if she were but a feather's weight, and borne out into the rain and darkness.

She knew well whose kindly arm was thus supporting—thus bearing her out of danger of death and from the power of her brutal persecutor. Therefore she made no outcry, did not struggle to release herself, but let her bare head rest against a breast which throbbed more and more as he rushed on over rocks, and through tangled bushes, she knew not, cared not where, if it was only away from where she had been.

She did not speak, neither did he. But she knew she was approaching the Yuba, now swollen with the fall rains and the melting snows, for she could hear its rushing roar as it swept along the ragged cliffs and over the bars.

It was yet dark, but there was a grayish tinge in the east, from whence the river swept, which told Maggie the day would soon dawn, when she was gently placed on her feet by Wrestling Joe, who said:

"We will rest a moment while we listen. If my tracks were not at once found the rain will have washed them out before daylight. Then we will be safe. Within a few steps I have a secure hiding-place in which I have made preparation for an hour like this. You will not fear to go there with me, will you, my poor girl?"

"Fear to go with you, sir, after what I have passed through? Fear to go with you after you have saved me from death? Fear to go with you after leaving a wretch whom I abhorred more than tongue can tell—the murderer of my poor brother? No—no, sir—I would rather die near you than anywhere else. You are the only one

who has had a kind word for me since Henry Champe tore me from my far off home in Tennessee."

And the girl bowed her head upon his shoulder and wept.

"There—there, poor child. Don't cry. See! day is breaking. We must be out of sight of any prospectors on the bars before light comes."

While thus speaking he took her hand and led her down a very steep declivity, among bushes and rocks, and then pausing where the bushes seemed to be impenetrable he gently parted them, and bade her follow him.

He disappeared as he spoke, but she followed, and the next second found herself out of the rain, in a dry cave, where all was total darkness.

"Fear not, my brave girl," he said, "we now are safe, at least for a time, though not thrice a rifle-shot from the place we left. This spot can only be reached, however, by the devious route I took."

Maggie stood there in silence while her preserver lighted a torch and then led her farther into a dry and roomy cave, in which, to her surprise, she soon saw evidences that it had been either used for or prepared for a residence.

There were several beds in it, boxes and cans of provisions, even dry fuel ready cut for firing. A slender rivulet of water coursed along one of the rocky walls, though it seemed to leave no moisture on the rocks above, for they, like the earth on which they stood, seemed singularly dry.

A lamp was now lighted and placed on a smooth, square rock, well calculated to serve as a table, and the larger torch was extinguished.

"We are safe here, my good girl, and we will rest after we have taken some food, for I shall not attempt to leave until night conceals my movements," said Wrestling Joe as he motioned to Maggie to sit down, while he took crackers, dried meats, sardines, and cheese from different boxes and laid them on the table.

She now with him partook of the food on the table, and then both lay down to take a few hours of much needed rest.

CHAPTER V.

HANK CHAMPE OUTLAWED.

Day dawned, hours passed, and though the ravine, the hills around, and the river-banks had been scoured by the men sent out by Bully Hank in search of Wrestling Joe and poor Maggie, not a trace of them could be found.

As party after party came in, reporting no success, the giant gambler swore and drank until he became a terror to all around him. Armed with a half-dozen revolvers and knives he belched out his threats and curses as a volcano casts out its lava, until the most wicked shuddered to hear him.

Entering the Casino one day he shouted for Gilroy, the proprietor.

"Don't make so much noise, Hank; you'll make the miners down in the ravine leave their work. They'll think there's murder going on here by daylight, and that's all out of rule in California," said Gilroy, answering his call.

"I don't know as 'twill be long!" cried the ruffian. "I'll have somebody's blood if Wrestling Joe and my gal Mag isn't found. That's signed, sealed, and sworn to. Now, where is that singin' woman of yours?"

"Where she don't want to be disturbed. She is under engagement to me for seven days, and till that time is up she is my property, to have, to hold, and to protect."

"To protect?"

"Yes, to protect, Hank Champe! I'd rather be on good terms with you than bad. I know just what you can do, and I rather think I know what you can't do, with all your money; so, if you'll let well be well, you'll not offer to annoy that woman in any shape till her seven days' engagement with me runs out. I've said my say—now step one step to break my rules, and I'll shoot you down if I die the next minute."

"That's the way to talk, stranger. I like to see a man have rules, and, when he has, make folks live to 'em, or die a breakin' 'em."

The man who uttered these words was a stranger to every one in the room. He had just come in.

With the air of a gentleman, the carriage of a king, in his tall, commanding form, and a face well suited to his lordly figure, he wore the soiled, blood and weather stained garb of a hunter, carried a hunter's weapons and accouterments.

Long brown hair floated in curls far down over his broad shoulders, a soft, glossy beard of the same color fell from his open, manly face, only his eyes were extremely noticeable.

There was a haughty flash, a fire that shone in them, when he spoke, and he seemed to look those whom he addressed through and through.

"Who are you, I'd like to know?" asked Hank Champe, with his accustomed sneer. "I reckon you're a stranger in these parts, or you'd be careful in putting your lip in where it isn't wanted."

The stranger threw those wild, fierce eyes on the ruffian gambler, and the latter quailed and shook as the intensity of their fire burned into his coward heart.

"Cur!" hissed the stranger. "Have you forgotten Mary Morley, the purest rose that ever blossomed? Has the fourteenth of March, six years ago, left your memory? Have you forgotten the Brazos de Santiago?"

"Edward Carroll—I did not know you," said the gambler, and he trembled from head to foot.

"You know me now: keep out of my way, if you value life. Dog, begone."

The gambler sneaked away like a whipped cur, while the stranger turned, and with the most courtly language apologized to Gilroy and Bellows for having interfered in their conversation.

"You are welcome, sir, if for no other reason than that the ruffian who has just slunk from your presence stands in awe of you," said Gilroy. "While in our camp accept my hospitality as a welcome guest. That man is a terror to most of the people and a nuisance to all."

"I could hang him with the evidence I possess—but, great heavens that voice! Ione here?"

The man rushed wildly out from the Casino, and Gilroy saw him take his course to the cabin, where La Belle Oreana was singing.

"Is the man crazy, or what?" cried Gilroy, as, followed by his bar-keeper, he hurried out of the Casino, close in the tracks of the stranger.

The latter ran down to the closed door of the little cabin in which the female singer was rehearsing, and attempted to open it. The door was fastened inside, and Gilroy was by his side the next instant.

"Look here, sir, the lady who is in that cabin must not be disturbed!" cried Gilroy. "She is under engagement to sing for me for seven nights, and for that time no man on earth shall annoy her!"

"I must and will speak to her!" cried the stranger, whose face was pale, and air determined.

"You must not, and shall not, unless she desires it, and not then if it interferes with her engagement to me!" cried Gilroy, in a tone equally determined.

What might have come—for both men had laid their hands upon pistol butts—we can well imagine had not the door flew open.

The lady stood in the doorway, holding her beautiful boy by the hand.

"Edward, you here?" she said, and there seemed reproach both in her tone and look.

"Yes, Ione, yes!" he answered. "I have wandered far and wide, and struggled to forget; but—"

"Hush—we must talk alone, and then you must go!" she said, in a tone which, though tremulous, was imperative.

Turning to Mr. Gilroy, she added:

"Sir, I wish to hold an interview with this gentleman. It will not last long, will not be renewed, and will not interfere with the engagement I have made to sing for you!"

Gilroy bowed, but looked perplexed.

"Come in, Mr. Carroll; my abode is not very inviting, but it suits my present need."

The stranger entered the cabin, and the lady, still holding her little boy by the hand, closed the door.

Gilroy and Bellows re-entered the Casino, and sitting

down to a friendly game of old sledge, tried to amuse themselves.

An hour passed, and then the stranger came in and took a seat near them. He was calm, but very pale.

"Will you take a drink, Mr.—Carroll, I believe, is the name?" said Gilroy, by way of opening a conversation.

"Yes, sir, Edward Carroll is my name. I will drink a glass of water. I never touch a stronger liquid."

"You look pale, sir; if unwell, a little brandy might do you good."

"Excuse me, sir, I do not believe in that kind of medicine. I am not ill. I am fatigued with travel, and shall rest here a little while and then leave."

"You are welcome to stay without cost as long as you please, sir. Any man is a public benefactor who can make Bully Hank hang his head as you did."

"Thank you again," said the stranger, drinking the water, which Fred hastened to hand him. "I have means to pay my way. The service I may render you in making this cowardly bully know his place requires no reward. I have a question or two to ask, and then I will tumble down somewhere to get a few hours' sleep, for I am in truth very weary."

"Go ahead, sir; I will answer so far as able such questions as you ask."

"There is in this vicinity, or has been, a man who goes by the name of Wrestling Joe."

"Yes; but he cleared out last night, after having a row with Bully Hank and his gang. He took Hank's girl with him, and I hardly think he'll come back, for Hank has set a gang up with a promise of twenty thousand dollars for his head."

"Went off with a woman?" said Carroll.

"Only to save her from death," said Fred Bellows, quickly. "The man cares no more for women than you seem to for brandy—that is, for any love he ever makes to 'em. It seems to be a part of his nature, though, to help the weak."

"I know him; he is not a bad man," said the stranger, looking down thoughtfully. "I am glad he escaped unhurt. How long has he been here?"

"About three or four months. He came up from the Bay, where he got his name by throwing the best wrestlers they had down there."

"Has he had any conversation with the lady whom I just left since her arrival?"

"Not a word, to my certain knowledge," said Gilroy.

"Yet she knows he is here," said the stranger, musingly.

"Yes, for when Bully Hank swore he'd kiss her last night he threw him on his head and came near breaking his neck. If that lady is anything to you look out for Bully Hank, for he has sworn to possess her."

"Let him dare to breathe an unholy wish in regard to her, and I will tear the tongue from between his jaws. The lady will fulfill her engagement with you, and then she will go."

"If not impertinent, may I ask will she go with you, sir?"

"No, sir; she will go alone. And now excuse me, but if you will show me a place where I can tumble down for a few hours' sleep you will do me a great favor."

"Here, sir, is where I bunk, and as I've taken my nap for the day you are welcome if you'll accept."

It was Fred Bellows who spoke, and he pointed to a curtained nook behind the bar, inside of which a cot bed was placed.

"Thank you; I will occupy it with gratitude," said the stranger.

In a little while his heavy breathing told that he was asleep, while Gilroy and Fred resumed their game.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DWARF'S THREAT.

"What's the matter, Hank? You look as if you had seen a ghost," cried one of the friends of the big gambler, when he returned to his cabin, after leaving the Casino.

"I've seen worse than a ghost," said Champe, gloomily.

"I've seen the only man on earth whom I dread. Ned Carroll is in the camp."

"What, your old Nashville friend?"

"Friend! He is the worst enemy I have on earth. He would kill me if punishment didn't end with the killing as far as he is concerned. Has Pepito, my Mexican boy, been here yet to-day?"

"He has been here two hours. He came in wet and tired, and rolled up yonder to get warm, I reckon."

The gambler pointed to what looked like a bundle of blankets tossed down in a corner.

Champe walked across the room and stirred the bundle with his foot.

"Pepito, wake up!" he cried. "Wake up, you imp, I want you!"

The bundle suddenly unrolled, and a singular being, hardly human in its looks, rose to its feet.

A very large head, set on immense shoulders, with long arms dependent therefrom, a short stumpy body on the merest apology for legs, became visible.

Pepito was a dwarf, and terribly misshapen at that.

Yet his face had the intelligence of a fiend in its expression, and his arms and shoulders looked as if he must possess immense strength.

He shook himself as he dropped the blankets from about his ungainly form, and in broken English snarled out:

"Why you not let Pepito sleep? He tired all same like dog when rabbit chase."

"I want you, and I'd like to see you or anybody else sleep when I want work done!" said Champe, himself once more, with something he could trample on before him.

"Well, me wait all same like dog to hear. Why no tell what you want?"

"You were with me at the Brazos de Santiago, you remember?"

"Yes, me sabe all that. What now comes?"

"You remember a man that insulted me there?"

"Yes; blue eyes, long hair, all same like a debbil. You run away and leave me to come after."

"Well, that man is here."

"Then you run again? You 'fraid of him all same as one debbil!"

"Never mind that. I've work for you to do. You must watch his every motion while he is here. See what he does, where he goes, hear what he says, and then report to me. You must watch the new singing woman, too, if there is any sign of her getting ready to leave, let me know instantly. If she should leave, and I not know it, I'd break every bone in your crooked body. Do you hear all I say?"

The dwarf nodded his shaggy head.

"Then look to it!"

"Si—yes, me look a little longer. Do you know, senor, how much more time I got to be dog for you?"

"No—as long as I feed you and care for you, I suppose."

"You buy me for how long?"

"Why, till you were twenty-one, and you don't know how old you are."

"Yes, me do know. Me got the writing from church in Monterey. My madre, she give me that with the little cross in this bag. Around my neck I wear it all time. One month more I'm your slave. Then I'm free, and you kick me no more! If you do—"

"Well, what if I do, you imp?"

"Then me kill you!" hissed the dwarf.

"What, you dare to threaten me? I'll crush you to death."

"Good! Do it while I am your slave. No get a chance after that."

"Bah! I am a fool to get angry with a thing like you. Do your duty, Pepito, and I'll be kind to you. Go and get a drink of aguadiente and something to eat. Then go and take a look at the man with blue eyes, and see if you remember him."

"Pepito has not forgotten him. He tossed me a golden ounce after you run away, so I shouldn't starve."

"Well, he doesn't look as if he had ounces to throw away on you or anybody else now. Be off and look to the work I've given you to do."

"For one month—no longer," muttered the dwarf, as he waddled away on his short legs.

CHAPTER VII.

RED FOX, THE PIUTE.

Weary in spirit and in body, the girl Maggie, feeling secure in that cave where Wrestling Joe had told her she was safe, slept long and peaceful. It was so long since she had known a quiet hour of rest with no fear of a rude and brutal wakening, that hours flew by before she became conscious.

Then she awoke to feel the warm blaze of a gentle fire near her, and to scent the fragrance of food in course of preparation. A few seconds elapsed before she could realize where she was, and then she glanced at a figure standing near the fire.

A thrill of terror ran coldly through her veins. She had expected to see Wrestling Joe there, but instead she saw an Indian, naked to the waist, with strong arms, knotted with muscle, broad shoulders, and beneath a tunic of undressed deer skin legs equally muscular. Hair long and black as jet hung down over his neck and shoulders, and coming low over his forehead gave to his dark face a fierce aspect.

Near him lay a blanket, hatchet, bow, and arrows, indicating him not to be a "Digger," but more likely one of the Utes, who live by hunting.

She lay still and trembled, while she tried to study his face to learn from that what might be her danger. Had he already murdered her friend and protector, and did he only wait for her to awake to make her death more terrible? These and other wild fancies ran through her brain, and she was almost wild with anxiety.

Suddenly the fire-light, reflecting in her open eyes, threw back a flash, and the Indian saw it. He smiled. Yes, an expression of kindness beamed out in his bronzed face. She rose on the cot to a sitting posture, and in a tremulous voice said:

"Please tell me, if you can understand English, where my friend, Wrestling Joe, has gone? He was here when I went to sleep."

"My pale-face brother no go far. He come back soon. Will his sister get up and eat? Deer meat here from the forest. Salmon from the river. Great Spirit good, give plenty to the hungry."

"No, I will not eat till he comes back. I will wait for him."

The Indian bent down and took up his blanket, and a curious coronet of feathers. He put the last on his head, and threw the blanket gracefully over his broad shoulders. Yet he left one of his magnificent arms and a portion of his brawny chest uncovered.

Maggie thought, Indian as he was, she had never seen such a splendid specimen of a man.

He put his hatchet in his belt, where a knife already rested, and taking up his bow, threw the arrow case over his shoulder.

"I will go look for my pale-face brother. The white sister will eat when I have gone."

"No, not till he comes back. He would not leave me without a word, I am sure, to tell me when he would return. You could not have harmed him—you do not look cruel."

"Me hurt myself soon as me hurt him," said the Indian, earnestly. "S'pose he no come any more, will not Red Fox, the Piute, be good friend all same to pale-face girl?"

"No, no! If he has left me I will go back and let them murder me in the camp. I do not want to live."

"Maggie, you must live, that you may see the wretch who has made your life a misery punished for his heartless cruelty to you and yours."

"Heavens, it is Wrestling Joe himself!" cried the girl, in delighted surprise. "I never saw such a complete disguise. Only your natural voice, in its old kind tone, can make me realize that it is you. The paint, the dress, and the long black hair make you as like an Indian as an Indian could be."

"I knew before that this disguise was good," said Joe, "for I have deceived Indians with it, and gone among

them undetected. But I wished to try the test more thoroughly with you, before venturing outside, for I knew if your eyes could not recognize me no one else would be apt to."

"The disguise is complete, but I dread the thought of your going out among those fiends," she answered.

"It is necessary, Maggie, for I must know the plans of that ruffian, Champe. If he has sent spies out to the other camps there is no safety for you in any settled place in all the Diggings. I must get you out of the country unseen. And there is another there, on whom he has set his fiendish eyes, who must be protected. Disguised, I can watch over her safety, and plan for your escape."

"Her safety? Is this woman, who is so beautiful, and who sings so sweetly, dear to you?" asked Maggie, wistfully looking in his eyes rather than to his lips for an answer.

"She is not, nor can she be anything to me now," said Joe, with a sigh. "Yet I must protect her from his brutal advances. Ask me no questions about her, Maggie, I cannot answer them. There is a mystery which I dare not unveil. Now, my good girl, rise, bathe your hands and face in that little pool and join me in supper. It is already night outside, and I must leave here very soon."

"You will return quickly?" cried Maggie, as she hurried to obey his request.

"Before the day dawns, if I live. Should I be detained, do not come out to seek me. If days pass you have food and fuel here to last weeks; you may make up some disguise from the bag of clothing yonder and try to reach the settlement on the Bay below, by following the river's course. But I feel sure of being back to look out for you myself."

"Heaven grant it," murmured the girl.

Then she joined him in the meal he had prepared, not that she had much appetite, but she wished to please him who had been so kind to her.

Both were soon satisfied, and then after looking carefully to every part of his costume, especially that the hair was securely fastened to his head, and the paint so well dried into his skin that none could be rubbed off, Joe took up his arms and departed.

A prayer from the lips of poor Maggie went with him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BULLY AND THE INDIAN.

At the usual hour the Casino began to fill with its customary run of visitors. The dancing girls, the gamblers, and the miners gathered in, the band took its place on the stand, and Fred Bellows, with a half dozen assistants, soon had all he could do to supply the calls for stimulating drinks.

One by one the players gathered in front of the various gaming-tables, and soon all was excitement once more.

Hank Champe was not very early in his visit, and when he did come in it was not in his usual bold and swaggering manner, but in a quiet, stealthy way, looking around on every side as if he expected to meet some one, yet dreaded to see him.

When he had traversed the crowd, and had not met the man he really did dread, he put on a bolder face, and when he met Gilroy near the bar he asked him, in a careless way, to take a "snifter."

The latter assented. As they touched glasses, Champe asked, as if it had only then come into his mind:

"What has become of that stranger from Tennessee, Gilroy? Has he left already?"

"He took a nap, got something to eat, and then went away, not saying when he would come back. He left a message for you, though," said Gilroy.

"A message for me?"

"Yes, he told me to tell you to wait. What he swore to do on the fourteenth of March should be done!"

Bully Hank turned white as he heard these words.

"Was that all?" he gasped.

"Yes; and it seems enough, too, by the way you shiver."

"I, shiver? It is only a chill that struck me as I came from my cabin here. I'll take another slug of brandy, and then look to the games."

The huge gambler called for brandy, and filling a glass to the brim, emptied it.

"I thought you never let niggers or diggers come into your place!" said Champe, as he put his empty glass down. "Look at that red imp yonder!"

He pointed to an Indian standing, plumed and blanketed, looking with apparent wonder at the musicians, who had just commenced to play.

He stood erect, with his head thrown proudly back, and his muscular arms folded over his naked chest.

"That is no digger. He is either a Ute or a Piute chief!" cried Gilroy. "Heavens! what legs and arms he has! He is an Indian worth looking at! He has not seen much of white men, by the way he stares around him."

"I'll have some fun with him by and by. See if you can get him to drink. I'll pay for all he drinks," said the gambler.

Gilroy said no more, and the gambler passed on to overlook the tables which he rented, to see that his satellites were at work. Having made the circuit he looked around to see if the Indian was still there. He saw him standing near the bar, apparently talking to Fred Bellows.

"Hallo! Got a new friend, Fred?" he asked, approaching the bar. "Can he talk English?"

"Not much—very broken," said Fred. "He has a heap more of sense, though, than most of the white men around here."

"How so?" asked Champe.

"He knows enough to let rum alone. I offered him wine, whisky, and brandy. He says no, he will not touch fire-water," replied Fred.

"Why you no like this?" asked Champe, lifting a bottle, and speaking to the Indian.

"Fifty fight in there. One fight enough for Piute, when he wants him. That all here!"

And he struck his brawny chest with his open palm. It sounded as if a sledge had struck a rock.

"Thunder! but you've got muscle!" said the gambler.

"Turn around here, and let's look at you!"

And he laid his hand rudely on the shoulder of the red man.

The latter shook off his grasp indignantly, and said in a low, bitter tone:

"Pale face keep his hand to himself, or Red Fox, the Piute, will make him see how long he is there." And he pointed to the floor.

"What! you make me measure my length on the floor, you red dog?" cried the gambler, in astonishment. "I reckon you don't know what you're talking about. I'll bet ten ounces against your blanket I mash the life right out of you."

The eyes of the Indian flashed, and he looked as if gathering up to spring upon his bulky antagonist.

Gilroy, who was close by, and had seen and heard all that had occurred, cried out:

"Hold on there! No wrestling till after La Belle Oreana sings. She comes on now. When she is through we'll make room and see if Hank Champe is bully of the ring, now Joe is gone, or not."

"Good! I'll wait," said Champe; "but see that the Indian don't leave. I'll show him what brag is good for."

The Indian paid no attention to the taunt, or its contemptuous tone. His eyes were fixed on the form of that magnificent woman, who, robed in white, with a single red rose in her dark, curling hair, stepped modestly, yet bravely, to the front of the stage.

A wild, enthusiastic cheer greeted her appearance. She bowed, then all was hushed. The rough men hardly breathed, for the night previous had made known to them what now to expect.

She sang an old ballad, one of those home songs which most of them had heard before, but never had heard sung as she then sang it.

As on the night previous her triumph was renewed, and she had to sing twice before they would allow her rest.

"What does the chief think of that?" asked Gilroy, who had watched to see what effect music had on the Indian.

"Smart squaw. Make heap big noise all same like mad panther," said the Indian, gravely.

"That's all he knows about music—now we'll see what he knows about wrestling," said Bully Hank, in a tone of

contempt. "I think I can tame him as a ranchero tames a mustang."

"I'll bet even twenty ounces he throws you best two in three," cried Gilroy, as the Indian threw off his blanket, and he saw such arms and shoulders as he thought he had never seen before.

"Make it a hundred, or all he dares," whispered Fred Bellows. "I'll go my last red and ten years' salary on the Indian."

"Yes; I'll go a hundred even on the Piute!" cried Gilroy, loud enough to attract the attention of half the people in the room.

"I take your bet—clear the room for us!" said Champe, eagerly, looking down on an antagonist, literally scarcely half his size, but, as he had to acknowledge, splendidly formed.

Instantly a space was cleared in front of the bar, and a select body of men picked by Gilroy were told to grasp hands and form across the room to prevent any one from getting into the way of the wrestlers.

Champe, after measuring the lithe, yet muscular form of the Indian with his eye, determined to place himself in wrestling trim. So he threw aside his velveteen coat and vest, unbuckled his belt with its garniture of pistols and knives, and kicked off the heavy boots which he wore. Handing his weapons to one of his pals, he bade him take care of them and see fair play while he squelched the Indian.

"What hold?" he asked, as he shook his huge form, and straightened to his full height, towering at least a head and a half, if not more, above the other.

"Hug—all same like grizzly bear," said the Indian, without a change in his grave face.

"Indian hug—I might have known he'd choose that. It's the very thing for me. I'll squeeze the breath out of him," said the gigantic gambler.

The face of the Indian did not change, but he stood firm and square on his mocassined feet, with his arms hanging easily by his sides. His dark eyes were fixed full on the face of his antagonist, who was now approaching with confidence in his glance.

"Take your hold!" cried Champe, as he bent down with outstretched arms to grasp the sinewy bronze, which stood so statue-like before him.

As he passed one arm under and one over the shoulder of the Indian, and thus with both arms encircled his body, the latter quick as thought held him in the same clasp.

Then the giant straightened up, lifting the Indian clear from the floor, and with all his strength strove to crush, as he said he would, the breath out of his body.

But the crush was not all one-sided. The knotted arms of the Indian seemed to press fairly into the huge frame of the gambler, the ribs cracked as the hug grew stronger, and it was the white man, not the red, who gasped for breath, under that terrible pressure.

A minute, and the giant bent and strained, his eyes fairly protruding from their sockets, and then he bent forward as if to force the Indian down.

The feet of the latter just touched the floor as he did this, one of them locked around the ankle of the gambler, the other foot struck the giant in the hollow of his leg, back of the knee—there was a whirl, and around like a tree torn from its base by a whirlwind, the giant flew, losing his equilibrium and his clasp at the same time.

Down, with a force which shook the building, he went, and it was alone. The Indian, freed from his grasp, and scarcely panting, stood erect, with folded arms, while Gilroy shouted:

"Good for Red Fox—that's once out of three! Where's the bully now? Two to one on Red Fox! Who'll take the odds? Three to one if anybody dares."

"I'll stake it. My hold slipped when I had him half down!" cried Champe, staggering to his feet. "Give me a glass of brandy and two minutes' rest, and I'll throw him so hard he'll never get up again. The cussed snake has greased his hide so one can't hold him."

"The pale-face lies!" said the Indian, in the same grave tone in which he had spoken whenever he opened his lips.

"A lie from a red nigger—that's more than I'll take from a white man. Hand me a knife!" yelled Champe, fairly frenzied with rage.

"Not till I've won my gold," cried Gilroy. "The stakes are up, and you shall do nothing but wrestle till the match is decided. Then, if you want to fight I'll back the Indian at that."

"And win every time!" cried Fred Bellows, in high glee. "Let him come again! Curse him, let him come again!" cried the giant, gnashing his teeth.

This time it was the Indian that took the initiative.

He sprang with the bound of a tiger upon Champe, locked his arms about him with a crushing force which made him howl with pain, and with a winding twist, which seemed to rend his very frame apart, hurled him a second time to the floor with stunning force.

"The stakes are mine!" cried Gilroy. "The stakes are mine!"

"That Indian is the devil or Wrestling Joe in a new shape," cried a burly partner of Bully Hank.

It was the man who held his belt and weapons.

"It is Joe himself! Now for that twenty thousand dollars. He is my meat," shouted another, who stood behind the Indian.

As he spoke he dealt the latter a fearful blow in the neck with one hand, and grasped at his hair with the other.

The wig of long black hair broke from its fastenings in his strong clutch, and Joe, revealed in spite of his color, fell to the floor under the force of the blow.

"Kill him, curse him, kill him on the spot!" cried Champe, staggering again to his feet. "Give me my tools, and I'll hack his heart out."

"Raise but a hand to harm him, and the coward who does it dies!" shouted a voice louder, clearer than the blast of a trumpet.

It was Edward Carroll, with a revolver in each hand, who, leaping from the curtained alcove behind the bar, now bestrode the body of the fallen wrestler.

"Shoot him down as well. Fifty thousand dollars for both lives!" cried the gambler.

His pals rushed on; knives and pistols were out on every side, and while Gilroy and his men sprang to aid Carroll every gambler in the room rushed to assist Champe.

It was a fearful moment, but a woman's shrill cry was heard, and at the same instant her eyes flashing an indignant fire, the great singer rushed between the opposing lines.

"Brutes, coward brutes, fall back!" she cried. "Twenty of you upon two men—back, dogs, back!"

And she snatched from the hand of Champe the huge bowie knife which he brandished, and stood before him like an avenging fury.

With a shout full fifty miners, armed to the teeth, ranged themselves on the side where she stood.

The gamblers saw that the odds were against them. They stood irresolute.

"Joe, fly; be off by this door!" cried Fred Bellows, opening a door in the rear of the bar.

"Never—never will I owe my life to him!" cried Joe, wildly, pointing to Carroll, who still stood fronting Champe and his gang.

"I command it! Go, your life must not be sacrificed. Indice will need you yet," cried the woman, and then, while a spasm of agony seemed to contract his face he turned and disappeared through the door.

"Away—away and hunt him down!" shouted Champe to his men.

"Halt. The man who moves from his track dies!" cried Carroll.

Two of the gamblers sprang toward the front door, but each fell with a ball through his brain before he had taken three steps on his way.

The rest stood still and trembled, for the hand was yet uplifted and the finger pressed the ready trigger which waited for another victim.

"Why don't you shoot me?" shrieked Champe, wild with rage.

"It is not time. Wait for the Fourteenth of March!" said Carroll, calm as if his hand had not just sent two souls to hurried doom. "Back to your games, gamblers. The rest to your amusements. The play is over; this lady will kindly sing again."

It seemed as if Carroll possessed a magic power. The

sporting men fell back to their tables, Champe slunk away to a corner. Then as gracefully as if leading a queen to her throne the stranger led La Belle Oreana back to the stage, where, in a minute more, her clear voice rung out in song with more force and thrilling sweetness than she had yet exhibited in previous efforts.

The effect was more than magical. The miners went wild with delight. Gold flew in showers at her feet. Cheer on cheer rent the air. Again and again she was called out, only to receive renewed proofs of the admiration already shown.

Yet now she was alone. The stranger, after leading her to the stage, disappeared from view. Whither he went no one seemed to know. Perhaps, like Fred Bellows, he had followed Wrestling Joe.

As soon as the excitement began to lessen after the singer had retired under the escort of Gilroy to her cabin, the proprietor of the Casino went to Champe, who sat glowering in a corner, and demanded payment of the bets on the wrestling match.

"You don't get an ounce. It was a put-up job on me," said the gambler, bitterly. "You knew all the time that it was Wrestling Joe."

"I did not!" said Gilroy. "I thought it was an Indian to the very last. And so did every man in the room. He looked Indian, and acted Indian to the life. The bets were fair bets, and must be paid."

"We'll fight first," cried the gambler, growing desperate, for he had accepted every stake and all the odds.

"You'll pay first, and when you fight, fight me!"

It was Edward Carroll who said this. He had entered in time to hear the gambler's refusal and threat, and now took his time to repay Gilroy for his timely aid a few minutes previous.

"Devil! Say no more. I'll pay it. But by all that's black and foul, I'll get even with all of you yet. A week and her time is up."

CHAPTER IX.

PEPITO DEMANDS HIS FREEDOM.

As usual, day was dawning when the gamblers, who bunked with Hank Champe, left their games, and, with their leader, retired to his cabin to count their gains, store them away, and retire for their usual morning's rest.

The only sleep they got must, of course, be had in the day time.

Champe was very sore in body and spirit over his late defeat, but most of all in the escape of the man whom he so longed to see dead before him.

"You were a pretty gang of cubs to let that Joe get clear," he said, bitterly. "Why didn't some of you pop him over?"

"Why didn't you do it?" asked one of the boldest of the gang. "You had the tools in your hand."

"Yes, and Ned Carroll had me covered. The man he shoots at dies, and you know it."

"He covered us as well as you. Two of our best men gone by his hand shows what it was to try to carry out your orders. Bill Pentecost and Sam Buchanan are cold—we don't care to try the path they had to take."

"Curse him, he shall swing for that! If he hadn't Gilroy and the miners on his side I'd fix him with the committee before another sunrise."

"The woman is on his side, too."

"On Joe's side, you mean. I'll fix her. She has only five more nights to run. When her engagement ends with Gilroy I'll have her, if I wade knee deep in blood to get her."

"Will it pay?" asked one of the gamblers, a fellow who had grown gray in wickedness.

"It will pay for me," said Champe, "and what suits me is not the business of anybody else. I'll pay her for flashing my own knife in my face. I'll lead her over the track in a way that will tame her till she is as humble as a sick kitten."

"She may get away from you, as Mag did. While Joe is around that kind of property will never do to insure on."

"Let him stay around—that is all I ask. I'll find where

he hides before long, and then—What the thunder is the matter with you, you imp of Satan?"

The last words were addressed to the Mexican dwarf, Pepito, who came rolling into the cabin in a succession of summersaults, a way he had when he was excessively pleased.

"Me tell you—*poco, poco!* Me got one more month before me free man, eh?"

"Free, devil—why do you bother about that all the time?"

"Because now me slave. You can kick and cuff Pepito all you like. When me free you do it, and I knife you. Make me free to-day, and give me a hundred ounces, and Pepito give you big news!"

"What news?"

"Me tell you where Wrestler Joe hide away."

"Tell me now, you hunched-backed scoundrel, or I'll cut your heart out."

"Cut heart out—cut back in strips, Pepito will not speak 'less you make him a free man and give him a hundred ounces," replied the dwarf, doggedly.

"Promise—we'll never witness!" whispered a gambler.

"I'll do it. Now, where is Joe," cried Champe.

"Make me free man on paper before the Alcalde. Give me the gold. Then me tell," said the dwarf.

"Ten thousand curses, you miserable dog—do you doubt my word?"

"Pepito help Bully Hank lie heap many times. He knows him," said the dwarf, with a sneer.

"I've a good mind to blow the top of your head off."

"Good! Shoot. You kill one month of your property."

"Come, Pepito, tell me where this Joe is hidden. It shall be the best day's work you ever did."

"Pepito has told you his price!"

"I'll pay it; curse you, I'll pay it, and take a receipt after the job is done. Go and get the Alcalde here, one of you. I'll set the imp free, if that'll do him any good," cried the gambler.

Pepito doubled himself up again, and rolled around the room like an animated bundle, in the exuberance of his joy, until the messenger returned with the Alcalde, an officer appointed according to the then Californian law to fill the place of a justice.

"Make out a deed of manumission, a certificate of freedom for that boy!" said the gambler to the Alcalde, pointing to Pepito, who was once more on his feet.

"What name?" asked the Alcalde, sitting down before a table and producing writing materials.

"Pepito the Dwarf, that is enough."

"No, it is not enough. Pepito Agradillo, son of Anita Agradillo, widow of Brazos de Santiago. Make it big strong," cried the dwarf.

The paper was drawn and duly signed and sealed. Then it was handed to Pepito.

"Me free now?" asked Pepito of the Alcalde.

"Yes, as free as I am."

"Me can wear a knife, and use it all same as free man?"

"Yes; but I advise you to keep inside the law."

The dwarf turned a summersault to a corner of the room, where his bed, a couple of old blankets, was stowed. From beneath it he took a long two-edged dagger.

"No man kick or strike Pepito any more," he said, as he thrust this weapon into a sash about his waist.

"Now give me the hundred ounces, then me tell you where to find Wrestler Joe."

"Count him out the money," said Champe to one of his men.

A hundred doubloons were told out on the table when the deed had been written.

The dwarf counted them, and put them in a bag, and thrust it inside the great frock or sack which covered his ungainly form.

"Now lead us to the place where Joe is hid. Come, boys, put on your tools and come along," cried Champe.

"Pepito not fool enough to go there and get a bullet through his head," cried the dwarf. "He'll tell you where to go—that's all he promised."

"Then tell and be quick, or you'll get the bullet here," cried the gambler, angrily.

"Me tell, because me promise, not because you scare!" said the dwarf, indignantly. "Me free man now—no

'fraid of you, nor anybody else. You go to Big Bluff on the river, just east from the ravine. Keep along till you see bushes where Pepito tie a white rag. Break apart bushes easy; look in and see cave. There Wrestler Joe and girl Mag keep house."

"Good! We'll have them both. Pepito, you've earned your reward. I'll give you your receipt by and by. Boys, tie him hand and foot till we go and see if he has told the truth!" cried the gambler.

"Me free—me free! Keep off your hands!" yelled the dwarf, as a dozen men sprung forward to seize him. "Me free—me free—keep off, or I use my knife!"

His dagger was out, but a cruel blow from a club in the hands of one of the men struck his arm down helpless to his side—another fell on his head, and in a second he lay bound and helpless where he had fallen.

"Now, boys, prime up on that old brandy, and then we'll go and bag our game," cried Champe. "We'll bring Joe and the girl here and then send them and the dwarf to another world in company."

"Good! That's the plan for fun!" cried one of the brutes, and he hurried to the liquor closet for the stimulants to fit himself and comrades for the cruel work before them.

The dwarf, recovering consciousness, lay there with his eyes glaring out helpless hate, gnashing his teeth like a wounded beast, howling out curses in his native tongue. It was a horrible sight to look upon.

CHAPTER X.

THE DWARF'S REVENGE.

Champe, elated at the thought of soon having his twice vanquisher and hated foe in his power, and of recovering the poor girl who had escaped from his cruel hands, drank deeply, and added his mockeries to the jeers and taunts of the others.

The dwarf howled until he was hoarse, wept scalding tears, and bit himself like a tormented scorpion, until his arms were covered with blood.

When Champe thought that his own courage was sufficiently stimulated he called to his companions to arm and make ready for a start.

"We will gather up the rest of the boys as we go," he added. "For that chap will fight when he is cornered, we know that."

"He'll fight in a corner or out of it!" said one of the men. "We can't go too strong, or be too careful either."

The dwarf was alone. He had not been biting his flesh all the time. He had been gnawing at the cords which bound him. So effectually withal that within a minute after he was left alone he stood on his feet.

"Revenge! Revenge!" he cried, wildly, and with all the speed his short limbs would enable him to make he left the cabin.

In a few seconds he was in the Casino.

Gilroy, Fred Bellows, and Edward Carroll were standing together, conversing earnestly.

"Save Wrestler Joe—save Wrestler Joe, and girl Maggie!" gasped the dwarf. "Bully Hank and his men are after Wrestler Joe. They tie me up so I can't tell—save Wrestler Joe! Save girl Maggie!"

"Does Champe know where he is?" asked Fred, hurriedly.

"Yes—in cave on river bluff!" cried the dwarf.

"We have not a moment to lose—if that is the case!" cried Fred. "Thank Heaven there is a signal to put him on his guard!"

The young barkeeper rushed out, and taking in his hands a large keg of powder, ran to a hole which had been burrowed in the cement bank near by. He was in there but a minute, and when he came out he was covered with dirt.

Ten seconds after he reached the open air there was a terrific explosion in the cavity, which shook the ground like an earthquake all about.

"I reckon that was the quickest blast ever got up and set off," cried Fred, with a laugh. "Now Joe will be ready to hold his ground till we can help him. Pepito, you've done us a good turn by letting us know of this

matter. Add to it by telling the miners where we have gone, so they can come and help us."

"Tell 'em yourself—Pepito got other work to do. He knows a short cut, and he go and have fun for himself now. He free man, is Pepito. Reckon Bully Hank find that out 'fore one hour go by."

The dwarf disappeared, and the three men sending a servant to alarm the miners, hurried off; Bellows leading the way to assist Wrestling Joe if there was yet time.

The fact that not a gambler was to be seen hanging about the cabins or saloons told but too plainly that the ruffians had started on their errand, and Fred broke into a run as he headed for the ravine, which he had to follow down to reach the bluff. Carroll and Gilroy were close behind him, and in a little while the trio reached the bank above the river.

The stream was running banks-full, for it was not yet cold enough in the mountains to check the melt of snow by the falling rain, and it roared and tore along in noisy swirls below, while they glanced along the ledges to see if the gamblers were yet in sight.

A hurried glance told them that they were, a large party being visible, creeping cautiously along the base of the bluff, but a little way above the water, some two or three hundred yards ahead of them.

"Come on," cried Fred. "If Joe is not awake and ready they will be on him before we can get there. Champe is ahead—he sees the spot—ah! He halts. What is that?"

A shrill, angry cry more like the yell of a beast than the call of a human being reached their ears.

They did not pause, but kept on, though the gamblers had come to a sudden stop.

Again the wild cry reached their ears, and they looked up to the cliff above the spot where Champe and his companions stood.

The dwarf was there, waving his arms and howling out fearful curses.

"Me free man!" he yelled. "Take water, Bully Hank—take water or me roll rocks."

And the next instant a huge boulder, a ton's weight almost, loosened by his superhuman strength, tore down through the bushes and barely missed the spot where the gambler stood.

Another came yet nearer, and Champe rushed back while he tried to get his pistol to bear on the dwarf.

But the latter, dodging from point to point, rained down the huge stones, and though fired at several times, still unharmed, howled out his curses.

"Me got you in trap. Take water!" he yelled again.

"Halt!" shouted another voice in the rear of the gamblers as they began to retreat from the shower of stones toward the ravine.

Champe turned white as a ghost when he saw that Edward Carroll once more covered him with his pistol, while Fred Bellows and Gilroy each had their weapons raised.

"Halt where you are," cried Carroll, sternly. "We've got a game to settle and this is a good place to play it out."

"Take water! Take water!" yelled the dwarf. "If you don't, Pepito shake all mountain down on you."

As he spoke, another rock came bounding down, it headed directly for Champe, and with a cry of terror he leaped into the ice-cold river.

"Take water! Take water!" screamed the dwarf, and down came another avalanche among the gamblers. Terror stricken, they had no choice—they would surely be crushed to death if they remained where they were. One after another they leaped into the river, and with the current to aid them gained a bar near half a mile below, where they crept out, half chilled to death by their swim for life.

The dwarf danced in his wild glee like a fiend gone mad, shouting:

"Me free man. Me make Bully Hank take water. Me no slave. Me Pepito Agradillo now."

Bellows and his friends laughed at the manner in which the terror-stricken gamblers were forced from the trail until tears ran down their cheeks, while Wrestling Joe drawn from his hiding-place by the noise of the falling stones, and the cries of the dwarf, made his appearance under the bluff.

"Tell him that you and some chosen friends will escort him away from this dangerous vicinity to-night," said Carroll to Bellows, as Joe came in sight. "I will retire so that he may not know I have anything to do with the matter, while you talk to him and explain how matters stand. He had best move from his present quarters as soon as may be, for though we can guard the approaches to-day we may not be able to do it after Champe gets such a gang together as he can command."

"I will arrange it all, Mr. Carroll," said Fred. "Step behind those bushes while I go to him."

The manner in which Joe came out, fully armed, proved that he had heard the signal of alarm, but he did not realize the extent of his recent peril until it was explained by Fred.

When he learned that the gamblers knew of his place of concealment he at once knew he must leave with the helpless girl whom he had so far shielded. He told Fred that he would not even wait till night, but before the gamblers could recover from their involuntary bath and get ready to renew any attempt to find him, he would take a trail that led east from the cave into the mountains, cross the river on a raft at an eddy with which he was acquainted, and try to strike into the country below.

While Fred Bellows and his friends kept watch down the river to prevent the gamblers from making another attempt to reach the hiding-place of Wrestling Joe the latter, with such arms and other necessities as he could carry, left the cave accompanied by Maggie, and crept off under cover of the thick "musquite" undergrowth up the river.

About three miles had been passed over, and Wrestling Joe had made rapid time, when he turned down a ravine which led directly to the water.

Maggie noticed that the water did not seem so rapid here, and Joe told her there was an eddy, and he here intended to build a raft and cross to the other side.

There was plenty of drift-wood, logs, and branches, which had been left on the shore by the flood, and he had brought lines to tie these together, as he had done before when wishing to cross a stream where no boat could be found for the passage.

They were down close to the water-side, in a deep cavern-like ravine now, and Joe worked fearlessly, for he had no thought of being seen there by his enemies, or even strangers, for they were out of all line of travel.

"Will it be easy to cross?" asked Maggie, while Joe was binding the small logs together.

"Yes, I think so," replied Joe. "The water is sluggish here, and the river not very wide. The eddy you see twirls up stream for quite a ways, and when we strike the current on the other side we will have but a short distance to paddle or pole, and then we are over. Once in the woods there I know the course to Feather River, and when I reach the diggings over there I will find friends, or at least shelter for you and myself."

"Oh, how happy I will be!" said Maggie. "You will let me work for you as long as I live, to pay you for your goodness."

"I will watch over you and protect you, till I can send you to your friends," said Joe, kindly.

"I have no friends on earth but you," said Maggie, tearfully. "Hank Champe killed my brother—he was the last left to me."

"Well, well, don't cry; I will be a brother to you so far as I can. The raft is ready. Get on this end, where I have put our bundles, and sit perfectly still. I will manage it best without any help."

Maggie obeyed, and got upon the frail structure, which, when Joe added his weight, was almost even with the water's edge.

Yet it was buoyant enough to bear them, and as Joe seized a long pole with which he intended to push and paddle the raft across he felt sure that five minutes would not pass before he was safely over with his companion. Pushing boldly off from the rocky shore, the current of the eddy carried the raft up along the bank quite smartly for fully three hundred yards, then as it began in its circular motion to whirl out toward the middle of the river, Joe set his pole hard against the bank to give it such mo-

mentum that it would reach settling depth on the other side.

He threw his whole weight on the pole, and it was an unfortunate act. The pole snapped in the middle, and it was only by the exercise of his extraordinary agility that he preserved his own equilibrium and remained on the raft.

"What will we do—what will we do" exclaimed Maggie, who at once saw that with the short piece of pole he could not reach the river bottom, or do scarcely anything to propel the raft.

"Keep cool, and take our chances—that is all," said Joe. "The eddy may take us over so near the other side that I can swim with a line to it; if not we must trust to Providence. Keep up your courage."

"I fear nothing while I am with you," said the girl, with a smile.

Joe now anxiously watched the current which had swept the raft already far out into the stream. Using the short stick as a paddle he hoped to force the raft over, but it was deep in the water, and very unwieldy. It worked all too slowly toward the desired bank.

Now the eddy began to yield to the current, and slowly, yet surely, Joe saw that the raft was leaving it. He used his paddle as rapidly as he could, but soon saw that every effort would be made in vain.

In a very little while the raft was swept into the swift current, and then rocks and trees seemed to fly as the voyagers sped down the stream. Rocks and bars threw up high ripples, and at times the soaked logs went entirely under, terrifying poor Maggie; but Wrestling Joe told her to be calm. If they passed the Timbucktoo Gulch safely he knew of another eddy below, which would take them close to the northern shore.

Down the river at a fearfully rapid rate the raft swept on, and soon Fred Bellows, Gilroy, and Carroll, who had remained to guard the trail from another approach by the gamblers, saw the position of the wrestler and the companion of his flight.

"Heavens and earth! the man is mad!" cried Fred Bellows. "He will run the gantlet of pistols and rifles from the camp at the mouth of the ravine. The gamblers are there now, drying their clothes before the big fires we see!"

Carroll did not wait to talk. He hurried down toward the place just indicated by Bellows, followed by the other two. But the raft swept on faster than they could go, heading in, too, with the current, toward the very point occupied by the gamblers.

Joe was not slow to realize the new danger, for his keen eye showed him where his enemies were long before they saw him. He made the girl lie down close on the logs, and he placed the bundles of blankets and other things before her body to shield her from the shots which he expected would come all too soon.

As for himself, he stood proudly erect, making no attempt to shield himself or to conceal his identity.

He was recognized while yet two or three hundred yards above by the eyes of hate which burned in the head of Henry Champe.

"There he is, and the girl, too! They're adrift! they're adrift and we'll have 'em now!" yelled the gambler.

"Get rifles, some one—our pistols are all soaked!" shouted another.

Rifles were got at the mining cabins, but too close at hand, in a few seconds.

"Take the ferry skiff and take 'em alive!" was the suggestion of a third.

"Good! The ferry-man can hitch to the raft and tow it in. Jump, boys; jump, and help him!" cried Champe.

The ferry skiff, capable of crossing with at least ten persons in it, was moored by a rope to a stake not forty yards from where the gamblers were standing.

The ferryman was in it, bailing out a little water which had dashed over its gunwale, when he heard Champe shout to him to clear his boat for passengers.

He had just cast off the rope that fastened it to the shore, and was looking at the crowd of gamblers who rushed down to enter it, when a dark object rolling like a ball bounded down the bank, hit him fairly in the stomach,

and sent him doubled up in a heap over the bow of his boat into the river.

When he rose to the surface he saw his skiff flying over the water with two long arms tugging at the oars, while above he could see the black, shaggy head of the Mexican dwarf.

While he struggled to reach the shore he was conscious of bullets whistling over his head, and saw that the gamblers were shooting as fast as they could. When he landed he could just see his boat far down the river, the occupants of the raft having entered it, and that all were unharmed, for Wrestling Joe was waving his hat in triumph, while the dwarf, still at the oars, was taking the skiff down stream on the far side of the river.

"Who'll pay me for my skiff!" he asked, angrily, as he ran up to the fire from his ice-cold bath.

"The Vigilance Committee, if they ever get hold of the thief who stole it," said Champe.

"But it is worth a hundred dollars a day to me here," cried the ferryman. "I can't do without it."

"Go find it, then, or build another. I'd give a thousand boats like that for them that got away in it. But they are not clear. Every camp in California has my friends in it, and they'll soon learn the power of Bully Hank! As to Ned Carroll—"

"Well, sir, what about Ned Carroll?"

It was the latter, who, walking up to the camp fire unobserved by the gambler, now confronted him.

"Even you can't save them! It was that I was going to say, and I do say it!"

"Dog! You may bark, but your bite is not dangerous. Tremble, for when the Fourteenth of March arrives you die."

Champe did tremble, and his companions saw how suddenly his face became ghastly white.

Gilroy and Bellows now came up. Though they had not arrived in time to serve Joe in his perilous passage they had witnessed the bold exploit of the dwarf, and had seen Joe and Maggie safely step into the boat from the raft.

They knew that for the present at least he was safe. The gamblers regarded them with angry eyes, but the recent firing had brought a large concourse of miners down to the river-side, and there were too many of them ready to side with Gilroy for the sporting men to defy.

CHAPTER XI.

FINDING SHELTER.

"Oh, Pepito, Pepito, you have come to save us!" cried Maggie, when she raised her head, as the skiff struck the raft, and saw who it was that reached out a long, strong arm to hold it fast.

"Yes—me free man now. Girl Maggie save Pepito more than once from Bully Hank's fist and foot. Pepito no forget. Get in here, girl Maggie. Get in here, Wrestler Joe! Pepito take you off all safe."

"Are you hurt? It seemed to rain bullets around you!" exclaimed Joe, as he helped Maggie into the skiff and then pushed the raft clear.

"No; Pepito too ugly to die," said the dwarf, with a wild laugh. "Bullets dodge him. Ha, ha!"

It was then that Wrestling Joe waved his hat defiantly, for as the skiff was just sweeping around a bend which would hide both friends and foes from view he wished both to know that he was safe from present harm.

"Where does Wrestler Joe want to go?" asked the dwarf, as he bent to the oars again.

"Not far away from that camp yet, if I can help it," said Joe. "Now that we have a boat and in it may cross and recross the stream at will, if we can only hide it, I would like, for a few days at least, to stay where I can watch matters over there."

"Good! Me feel all same like you," said Pepito. "Me hate Bully Hank. Me want to plague him to death. Me owe him a big debt. Long time he kick and beat me. Now me get revenge."

"There must be some good hiding-place in this gorge," said Joe. "Row close in on the north side, Pepito, and let us look."

The river here narrowed in between two steep cliffs and rushed on foaming and swirling among hidden rocks where they were, but the dwarf was strong and skillful at the oars.

He kept the skiff perfectly under command, and had it so close to the rocks in a few seconds that they were in an eddy or reflux current.

"Here—here—look—here is a shelf of rock and plenty of room for a camp," said Joe, as the skiff rounded in by a thick clump of beautiful berry-bearing manzanita bushes.

"A cave—hope no old grizzly in it," said Pepito, as he held on to the bushes to keep the skiff steady where it was.

"Nothing could get here except it came by water, and grizzlies do not take water when they can keep on land," said Joe.

He now stepped on shore and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction when he saw that the shelving rocks overhead, and the thick growth of manzanita in front made a complete shelter, both from storm and from observation in any direction.

Yet they were within an hour's walk from the camp on the other side of the river.

He helped Maggie out of the skiff, and then, aided by Pepito, drew the skiff out of the water, and concealed it in the bushes.

Together they examined the spot, and found it even more roomy than they had at first anticipated.

Both Joe and Maggie were wet to the skin, and the blankets and garments they had along were also soaked. But Pepito found dry drift-wood, and soon far inside of the cave they had a good fire to dry by.

"The want of provisions will trouble us here. I wish I had the stores I left above," said Joe.

"No go much hungry. Got salmon spear in the skiff," said Pepito.

The salmon spear was found, and in a few minutes two twenty-pound salmon were floundering in death-throes in the cave.

CHAPTER XII.

CHALLENGED TO A DESPERATE FIGHT.

An hour after the boat had vanished from sight down the stream, with Pepito, Wrestling Joe, and Maggie in it, Hank Champe had messengers on their way to every camp down the river, and even to the bay, to put his confederation on the watch for the fugitives, if we may call them such.

Then, with the rest of his companions he went to the Casino ostensibly for the purpose of drinking and having a jolly time, but really, as most of his gang knew, to pick a quarrel with Gilroy, for his recent cold bath and double disappointment had driven him to desperation.

"Set out your rum—set out your rum!" he cried as he went in, "we're bound to wash away all care."

Gilroy did not care to lose his custom, and feeling well able, with Fred Bellows at his side and Edward Carroll not far away, though not in sight, to "hoe his own row" if trouble came, complied with the orders as the gamblers called for drinks, and soon there was a merry carousal under way.

"Cussed cold that Yuba. I'll never take a drop of water inside again as long as I live!" said Champe. "I'll be like Sam Bug in Nashville. He was full one night and went down on Water street to see the roses, but missed his way, and got into the Cumberland. From that time on he was never known to take water. Hallo—who in thunder is that?"

The last exclamation broke from his lips as a man in full Californian vaquero costume entered the place. A man not over five-and-twenty years of age, with a fine Spanish face, but eyes which seemed to burn like coals of living fire in his head. A man well proportioned, but not large, with heavy spurs jingling on his heels, and the inevitable revolver and a huge bowie-knife in his belt.

Just behind this man came as lovely a specimen of a native Californian girl or woman as man ever set his eyes on. Delicate in feature, a dark brunette in complexion,

with a rich roseate flush on her face, large, expressive eyes, shaded by long lashes, and an exquisite form well displayed by a tight-fitting bodice, short skirts, silken hose, and neat slippers—she was a picture to be gazed on only with admiration, even by the coldest eye.

"Come up, stranger—come up and join us in a drink with that pretty mate of yours," said the gambler, looking at the young woman with a gaze which caused her to drop her eyes in confusion.

"Joaquín Muriata does not drink the strong drinks of the Yankees!" said the Californian, haughtily. "When he drinks wine he is able to pay for it. There is gold in his bolsa."

"Well, you needn't be as snappish as a wild-cat about it. When Hank Champe offers to treat he means kindly. Maybe that bit o' beauty will take something."

The eyes of the man who called himself Joaquín Muriata fairly flashed as he turned away and took a seat at a table in a corner of the room, calling the female to his side in a voice strangely low and sweet, compared to the tone used when he addressed his answer to the gambler.

"Come, dear wife, and we will have something to eat," he said, and then speaking to a waiter who approached he asked, in good English, for the best food the house could afford.

While this was being brought the gambler Champe, whose flushed face told that liquor was fast firing his veins, kept his eyes fixed on the face and form of the lovely woman, and it seemed as if he was planning some of his usual villainy.

Calling one of his desperadoes to his side he told him to manage to pick a quarrel with the Californian, by which he could be separated from his companion.

"You are a dead shot, Sam," he said. "Get him into a duel, and put him out of my way, and you shall have that solitaire diamond you've tried to buy from me so long."

"I'll do it—I'll do it," said the fellow, who had long sought to become the possessor of the jewel spoken of, which even then flashed in the bosom of his leader in crime. The waiter was approaching with a tray containing coffee, meats, etc., and was in the act of putting it on the table when Sam Sidenham, the desperado picked by Champe to start the quarrel, staggered up against the servant and knocked the contents of the tray over into the lap of the woman.

"Perro! Dog—you did that on purpose!" cried the Californian, bounding to his feet, with his long knife already drawn.

"Suppose I did, what then?" said the desperado, whose pistol, cocked, covered the heart of the other.

"Joaquín—*mi esposo! cuidado—mi vida, mi alma!*" shrieked the woman, and she threw herself before her husband, ready to shield his body with her own.

"He called me dog! He shall pay for it. He shall fight me, or I will lash him like a dog from here to the river-bank!" cried Sidenham.

"He will fight you!" answered Joaquín, sternly. "Not as you gambling Yankees like to fight, a mere bar-room tussle, but a bold and manly duel in which one or the other dies!"

"Agreed—agreed!" cried the gambler. "How and when you like—the sooner the better. I'm a match for you or any other man that walks."

"We will soon see who wins in the game. For I will not even wait to gain strength by rest and food, though I have ridden fifteen leagues to-day," said the Californian.

"Name your weapons and choose your second," cried the gambler. "I'm dry, and I'll not drink again till I've made your pretty wife a widow."

"Coward! The knife—the knife which brings me hand to hand with you is my weapon, and my horse is my second. I will fight on horseback!"

He pointed to a small wiry mustang which stood untied near the door.

"Take him at that. Mount my gray thoroughbred and ride him down!" cried Champe. "My horse will weigh double his, and will go over anything that is in his way."

A duel on horseback with bowie-knives was a new thing, and the gamblers were elated with the novelty.

"Spread the news and we'll win a pile in bets," said Champe to his confederates.

The young wife of the Californian turned pale at the peril in which her husband was about to place himself, but the latter spoke soothingly to her in her own dulcet language, and she kept back the tears which filled her dark eyes.

"This cavalier shall have a second who will see fair play first, and if aught happens to him protect his young wife from wrong and insult."

These words rang out in a clear, manly tone, and Champe turned white with rage and apprehension as he saw Edward Carroll come forward.

"Do you second the man whom you put forward to make this quarrel," continued Carroll, speaking to Champe, "and mark you, if you raise a hand to aid your friend in the battle I will so maim you that you will live in agony until the fourteenth of March! Then you die!"

Champe trembled from head to foot, and made no reply to Carroll, but he ordered one of his men to bring out a magnificent thoroughbred racing horse, which he had brought from Tennessee, and now believed would in its weight and speed, and with its fiery temper, so overmatch the mustang of the Californian as to make the victory of Sam Sidenham a surety.

The Californian bowed low, as Edward Carroll advanced, and addressing him in pure Spanish offered his services. He thanked the American in courtly language, and introducing his lovely wife, by her maiden name, Maraquita, told her that he saw in this cavalier one on whom Heaven had written the title of man and gentleman. While he had no fears of the result in the duel to come—if accident did not happen, she could trust to Don Eduardo as to a brother.

"Come! come!" shouted Sidenham, as the gray horse, a noble animal to look upon, was brought near the door. "Come—say good-by to your beauty and get ready for work. I'm dry, and I've sworn not to drink till I've killed you."

"The fool will go dry to a place where water is unknown," said the Californian, quietly, and he took off his belt and handed it to his wife, that she might keep the revolver.

His bowie-knife had a knotted thong about the handle by which it could be swung to his wrist, and as he slipped this over his hand the gambler saw the advantage of it, and had a cord knotted to his own knife.

All now went out where the small, quiet-looking mustang stood beside the fiery racer. A crowd had already gathered, and bets were being made on all sides as to the result.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DUEL ON HORSEBACK.

While Champe and his gang eagerly called out for wagers upon the result of the coming duel the two men made their final preparations.

Joaquín tenderly kissed his young wife, and bade her take a seat inside of the Casino, where he could not see her, nor she by any agitation draw his attention from the work before him.

"Be brave, as you ever have been, dear Maraquita—trust in my courage and skill. I fight for life and for your safety," he said, as he turned away.

By mutual consent of the men and seconds both horses were unsaddled, though the bridles were left on.

Sidenham, bare-headed, was in his shirt sleeves, with a sash around his waist, his boots thrown off, and his knife slung to his wrist in the same manner that the Californian carried his weapon.

"Gentlemen, face each other, and hear the terms of combat!" said Carroll. "And you outsiders, listen also, and hear me say that the first person who interferes with horse or man on either side will receive lead from my revolver."

"Or mine," added Champe, who thought that he must say something while acting as second.

"Gentlemen, you will, when I give the word, mount your horses, ride each fifty yards, east and west, from

this spot, which will leave you one hundred yards apart. Do you understand?"

Both men bowed.

"You will carry or use no weapons but the knives held now by each of you," continued Carroll. "You will there remain until this fellow, Champe, and myself, have tossed for choice of giving the word. When the winner is ready to give it, and I shout, 'Forward! Fight!' you will put your horses to their speed, and fight the battle out in your own way, and may Heaven help the best and truest man! Do you both understand me?"

"We do," came from each man, simultaneously.

"Then, Mr. Hank Champe, walk you fifty yards to the west and drop your handkerchief, while I pace off the same distance to the east."

Champe obeyed without a word, and when the distance was measured both men returned to the center.

"Mount, and ride to your stations!" said Carroll.

With a light bound—scarce an effort—Joaquin leaped to the back of his horse, while Sidenham, more ponderous and unwieldy, gained his seat with an exertion that was quite apparent.

It was a moment of breathless silence when Carroll, shouting, "Gentlemen, are you both ready?" waited for an answer.

"Ready!" cried Joaquin, clear and sharp in voice.

"Ready!" came in a hoarse growl from the lips of the gambler.

"Forward! Fight!" again cried Carroll, and no bugle note ever rang more clear.

Now came a crisis which made every looker-on stand breathless in his tracks.

Both men eyed each other fiercely as they shot forward, their knives firmly grasped in their right hands, and their left drawing on the bridle rein.

Overtopping his antagonist Sidenham raised his arm to strike a deadly blow as the other came in reach, and at the same moment reined his horse over, with the intention of riding the other horse down.

The Californian seemed to divine the intention of the gambler even before they were near together, and instead of passing to his left swerved to the right, entirely, with a sudden bound of his agile horse, leaving the gambler striking furiously in the air, while he, with a mocking laugh, made a sharp but not serious cut on the gambler's left leg, near the knee.

A fearful curse broke from Sidenham's lips as his horse sped on, fully fifty yards, before he could check and turn him.

Then, seeing that Joaquin had come to a halt, with a yell of defiance and hate he drove his horse wildly toward him.

Joaquin was in motion almost as soon, and this time did not appear to intend any trick or evasion of a direct conflict.

Again close together, Sidenham aimed a sweeping blow at his antagonist, but his knife clove through the empty air, for Joaquin dropped over on the off side of his horse, with only a hand and foot visible as he shot past like a cloud.

An instant more, wheeling, the Californian was on the track of the gambler, and before the latter could turn to ward off the blow a deep wound in his back told him that he was the attacked instead of being the assailant.

Checking his horse, with a furious effort, he wheeled so short upon the mustang that his horse, vicious by nature, seized the former by the neck with his teeth.

Then Joaquin, as his horse plunged madly to free itself, parried a deadly blow made by the gambler, and with a sweeping cut severed an ear from the head of the gray horse so close to the head that the animal screamed with rage and pain, loosening its hold upon the neck of the mustang.

Now, the latter, striking and biting, and not attempting to fly, kept his master and the gambler each within reach of the ether, and for a few seconds knife met knife in cut, thrust, and parry so swiftly that fire flew in living sparks from the weapons.

Blood flew in streams from men and horses, and the animals as well as the men seemed maddened at the sight,

and fought with teeth and hoofs as fiercely as the two riders strove with deadly steel to slay each other.

Not long could this continue—the pony broke clear from another fearful grip taken by the teeth of the gray horse, and a shout rose from the betting gamblers, for they thought Joaquin was seeking safety in flight.

Never were men more mistaken. The pony of its own accord turned when a few lengths from the other, and with three mighty bounds rushed full at the breast of its larger antagonist, setting its teeth deep in the neck of the latter.

With a wild scream of agony the gray horse reared and literally fell backward, dragging the pony, rider, and all over with it, and thus, a struggling mass on the ground, horses and riders were so mingled that no one could tell which was uppermost or which likely to be victorious.

An instant of indecision, and Joaquin was seen driving his knife deep in the neck of the gray horse, which, rolling over on his rider, held the latter down with a leg crushed under its ponderous body.

An instant—the gambler made a furious lunge at the heart of the Californian; it missed him, but the knife, entering the eye of the pony, went deep, deep into his brain, and, with a scream almost human, the pony released its hold on the horse, staggered to its feet, and fell.

Then Joaquin, with flashing eyes, now fairly on his feet, raised his bleeding blade above the body of the helpless gambler. A second more and his fate was sealed. But the clear voice of Carroll was heard.

"Hold!" he cried. "The wretch is helpless—spare his life, worthless as it is."

"Don Eduardo shall be obeyed," said Joaquin, turning a mournful glance at his dying horse, but dropping his uplifted hand harmless to his side. "He shall have his way."

And Joaquin staggered back from very weakness, for he was bleeding from a dozen stabs and cuts.

At that instant a scream, wild and terrific—a cry of fearful agony from a woman's lips—rang out on the air.

"Ione!" cried Carroll, bounding from the spot.

"Maraquita!" cried Joaquin, in a tone of rage and agony, and he sprang toward the Casino, but fell fainting and senseless at the door.

Carroll had bounded away toward the cabin where the singer, Oreana, was quartered the instant he heard the scream, which he thought came from her lips. Rushing to the door he burst it open with the weight of his body, and there, pale but quiet, he saw the lovely woman sitting with her beautiful boy sleeping in her arms.

The scream had not come from her lips. Then the thought of the Californian woman came to his mind, and he rushed to the Casino.

Over the body of Joaquin, lying in the door-way, he bounded, and into the great room. One glance told him that it was tenantless.

Maraquita was gone! It was her scream which had reached his ears—her scream which had been recognized by Joaquin in his moment of coming helplessness.

Where was she? Not slain, for her body was not to be seen. Had Champe abducted her?

In a second he sprang out to look for him.

Less excited apparently than any one else around him, the giant gambler was assisting to extricate the maimed body of Sidenham from under the dead horse.

He had not been away from the battle-ground, it seemed. Who could have abducted the woman, if she had been torn violently away? He knew not what to think. Neither Gilroy nor Bellows had seen her since the battle commenced, and then she sat with her head bowed to her hands, weeping and praying for him whom she loved.

Carroll instantly hastened to aid Joaquin, and to try to restore him to his senses and to check the flow of blood from his wounds. In this he was aided by Gilroy, Bellows, and others, and soon Joaquin opened his eyes.

Wildly he gazed on the faces around—but he saw not the one he most longed to see.

"Maraquita—my wife, where is she?" he gasped.

"Be calm, my brave man," said Carroll, kindly, gently. "She is missing—probably has fled away in terror. She shall soon be found."

"Oh, never—never did she fly from me!" moaned the man, and tears gushed from his eyes. "I heard her scream of agony, and knew they were dragging her off. Oh, Dios Mio, if she only dies—if she only dies! For there is fate worse than death to one so pure, so good as she! Leave me, Don Eduardo, leave me, and go look for her. I ask it in Heaven's name. I spared him at your request. Oh, go look for her. For if she be not found—or if found, wronged, even in one hair of her dear head—woe—woe to the whole race of invaders! Better had they let loose all the demons on earth than wake Joaquin Muriata to revenge!"

Leaving the Californian, too helpless to stand, to the care of a surgeon just arrived, Edward Carroll now set out to try to learn the fate of the lovely Californian.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

When Edward Carroll, in company with Fred Bellows, left the Casino, to enter upon a search for the missing wife of Joaquin, the gambler, Sidenham, had been carried into the cabin of Champe, to have his wounds, which were very serious, if indeed not mortal, attended to.

As the two first-named approached the cabin Champe himself stood in the door, a look of fiendish exultation in his face.

"Have you come to report your man dead?" he cried, in a tone of sarcastic glee.

"Neither dead, nor likely to die, while your man has me to thank for his life, if he lives!" said Carroll, sternly. "Our business here, Henry Champe, is of a different nature, and you well know what it is!"

"On my honor, sir, I do not!"

"Your honor! As well might Satan boast of piety. I have no time for trifling—no inclination either to indulge in it. I wish to know where the wife of Joaquin Muriata is?"

"What that pretty little Mexican girl with the fellow who fought the duel—is she lost?"

The gambler put on a look of eager inquiry, which, if assumed, proved him to be a consummate actor.

"She is—has been abducted from the Casino while the duel was going on, and I am satisfied that you had a hand in it. That you were not directly engaged in it I know, for you were on the dueling ground all the time. But that the woman has been dragged away by your orders is equally certain in my mind, and the sooner you produce her unharmed the better it will be for you and all connected with you."

"Mr. Carroll, you are not the man to do a fellow injustice because you hate him."

"No, Henry Champe, much as I loathe you, I would not even do you injustice. But you should dread justice. Where is the woman? Tell us that we may take her to her husband, and no more will be said or done."

"I do not know where she is. Of this I will take my oath!" said the gambler, so earnestly that Carroll was half inclined to believe him.

"Some of your men do. If I pause in a search which will ransack every cabin in which a gambler hides his guilty head will you use your influence to have her restored in safety to her husband within an hour?"

"I will try. It will soon be night, you know, and hunting around here after dark is neither safe nor pleasant."

"Henry Champe, we will wait two hours. No longer; and mark you, sir, if you and your companions do not wish to know something like the game you once barely escaped from at Natchez Under the Hill, produce that woman safe and unharmed. There is that in Joaquin Muriata, which even the worst of you may dread, if you arouse the evil in his nature. We will try to keep him calm a little while, and see what you do."

They turned away, and the fiendish sneer again sat on the wicked looking face of the gambler as he muttered:

"Bluff is a good game well played. If Hill and Noyes have done as I told them the girl will not be found. They are brutal and treacherous, I know, but I had no one else to do the job. Ah—another stranger in camp."

A man was approaching with a bundle slung over his

shoulder at the end of a stout stick, or cudgel about three feet long.

He had a battered hat on top of a head covered with shaggy, red hair, which looked as if it had never become acquainted with a comb. His face was covered with a beard as fiery red as the hair above. A shaggy red eyebrow almost hid the one eye that was visible, the other was covered with a handkerchief as dirty as it well could be, and seemed to be closed, as if from a blow or accident. The handkerchief was drawn over his low forehead and tied in a knot behind his head.

A pair of dirty corduroy knee-breeches, gray woolen frieze stockings and coarse brogans, made up the lower part of his attire. On his back he wore the remnants of a swallow-tailed blue coat, which once might have been the pride of Tipperary, but now shorn of its tails, it made a sorry-looking jacket.

One could tell at a glance that he was an Irish emigrant, and he looked not only as if he had lately landed, but had gone through "a slight war" since he had got ashore.

"Hallo, Paddy—which way, my lad?" cried the gambler, thinking, perhaps, to have some fun with a "green 'un."

"Me name it's not Paddy, but Dinnis O'Grady, to be sure!" said the man, in as rich a brogue as ever delighted an O'Twade or a McSweeney.

"Well, Mr. Dinnis O'Grady, which way? Where from and where to, as the sailors say."

"Where from, is it? Why, from County Cavan, sure. And where to? The devil only knows and he's tongue-tied or else he won't spake. It's a long thravel I've had since I've seen a drop o' whisky or the skin of a warm pertatie."

"After work?"

"Worruk, is it? No sure. I'm after gould! Sure they tould me beyant it was up here in the hills askin' yer to pick it up. But devil a ask has Dinnis and that's meself, got yet."

"Well, you shall have a slug of whisky pretty soon."

"Long life to yer honor, and may yez never die while life lasts."

"You look pretty stout, Dennis!"

"Stout, yer honor? Sure in ould County Cavan devil a boy was there could handle me. Back-houl't or side-houl't, cross-buttock, and all!"

"So you can wrestle!"

"Faith I can that. And the shillelah comes handy as a spoon for my broth!"

"How did you get that eye bunged up?"

"Faith I hardly know meself. It was a long way down the river where there was a camp wid a black nager in it. And I stopped to git a bit to ate and a sup to drink, and the men bantered me to have a bout with the nager wid me hands, and not me stick. And jist to please 'em and pay for the whisky I said I would, sure. And I stood up foreinst him, and he come at me wid his head instead of his hands, and the next I knew I didn't know nothin'."

"You are not used to butting in the old country," said Champe, with a laugh. "But come in. I don't know but I've got work for a chap that is built up as solid as you. At any rate, you shall have all you can eat and drink till I decide."

"Sure then your honor needn't be in no hurry about decidin' while there's plenty inside," said the Irishman, entering the cabin.

CHAPTER XV.

"WRESTLING JOE IS HERE!"

Again the shadows of night were drawn athwart the earth, and, as was their custom, the miners, released from toil, gathered at the Casino—some to talk over the gains of the day, but by far the most of them to gamble, or drink, and thus yield up to those who did not labor the hard-earned results of their own toil.

The band commenced to play at the usual hour: the gaming-tables were soon surrounded; the dancing-floor filled with men and women; the bar-counter thronged as before.

On the dancing floor the liveliest man to be seen was the new-comer, Dennis O'Grady, who, having been taken under special patronage by Champe, the gambler, now

appeared in a cast-off coat belonging to the former, which was far better than his old jacket, though far too large for him—so much so as to make him look funnier even than he did before.

Dennis was a splendid dancer; the best in a jig or break-down they had ever seen in those diggings, and every time he danced he had a circle of applauding lookers-on about him, and a host of "friends" to ask him to take something whenever the dance was over. For all this Dennis touched the drink lightly, and though full of fun he seemed to be proof against intoxication.

Champe, after seeing his men at their tables, and the "banks" ready for the night's work, made his way to a position where he could overlook the dance, for he enjoyed looking on, though too clumsy and ponderous to enjoy the amusement in person.

The gambler felt a light touch on his shoulder a moment after he reached the spot where he could look at Dennis, who had taken a partner for a quadrille.

He turned short around with an angry frown on his face, but the frown vanished, for it was Edward Carroll who thus demanded his attention.

"Henry Champe, your two hours are up!" he said, in a low, stern tone. "I have just left Joaquin Muriata. His strength is coming back to him, and if it is he, instead of I, who demands his wife unharmed at your hands, it will be at the point of the knife!"

"What can I do?" said Champe, uneasily. "I do not know where the woman is. I have sent Hill and Noyes, two of my best men, to look for her. They are not back yet. For Heaven's sake, do keep the man quiet as long as you can. Where is he now?"

"In the little room belonging to Fred Bellows—close at hand, and as I told you, he is fast recovering his strength. He is desperate, and when he demands his wife it will go hard with those he faces. But for me he would stand, knife in hand, where I stand now."

"Keep him still, please, a little longer. I will go look for the men myself," said Champe.

"Then be in haste. It will be hard for me to save you for the set day of doom—the fourteenth day of March—if he comes out."

Carroll turned on his heel, and went back to the little room in the rear of the bar, while the gambler hastened to join two roughs, brutal-looking men who had just entered the front part of the Casino, with faces flushed as if with drink, or the haste of travel.

"Is she safe, Bill?" he asked of the taller of the two, as he reached them, speaking very low, so as not to be heard by others.

"So safe that no one will find her but us," said the other, with a hoarse chuckle. "We did the job up bunkum—got her off without a soul seeing us."

"Well, now, put on a bold face. When I bring you before Ned Carroll directly swear by all that is high and low you can find no trace of her. For she is too rare a bit of beauty to give up, as long as we can hide it."

"You'd better believe it," said Hill, with a chuckling laugh. "Where's her husband?"

"Under the doctor's hand and getting better!"

"Why in thunder don't you pay the doctor to make him worse. If he is out of the way it'll all come right by and by."

"That cursed Carroll is in the way. He has taken this Joaquin under his wing."

"Well, let him keep him there. We'll give 'em both a shove under before they're much older. But we're dry—it's your treat, Hank."

"Of course—come and hurry up, for it is time that singer was out, and I want a good long look at her to-night. Three nights more and she sings for me! Ha, ha!"

The three gamblers pressed forward to the bar, called for and took their drinks, and then turned, for the general hush all over the room told that La Belle Oreana was about to appear.

She came forward and bowed—there was one loud, universal cheer, then all was hushed again.

She sang one of her sweet, pathetic ballads, with the usual result. Cheer followed cheer till she came out to sing again, then presents were showered at her feet, and

she retired amid deafening plaudits, with the promise to sing again in an hour.

While she was singing, very pale, with plasters and bandages over his numerous wounds, the Californian, Joaquin Muriata, came out from the little room back of the bar. He leaned on the arm of Edward Carroll, seeming yet very weak. His sash was bound about his waist, and in it rested his long, terrible knife and a brace of revolvers.

He seemed to listen to the song, but his eyes were not on the singer. They rested with a wild, eager look on the face of the man Champe, wandering in feverish flashes off to the coarse, sensual faces of his two companions. The trio were looking at the singer and did not see Joaquin, who looked steadily at them until the singer was through her second song and had retired.

Then, still leaning on the strong and friendly arm of Carroll he approached the spot where the three gamblers were standing, just as the one called Hill asked the others to join him in a glass.

"We'll drink to our prize!" he said, as he faced toward the bar.

He turned white at what he saw before him—the stern, pale face of Joaquin Muriata—for the latter, with his hand on his knife hilt, looked him, and then each of his companions, in the face, with a fierce, inquiring gaze.

"My Maraquita! Where is she?"

He spoke in a whisper, but it went like thunder to their ears, for it was followed by the deadly lightning of a look which made them tremble.

"We—we don't know nothin' of the woman—we've hunted high and low to find her!" stammered Hill.

"And can't even see her track," said Noyes, confused, but anxious to do his share in lying.

"If he'll only wait we'll keep on trying to find her," said Champe, terrified at the look which the Californian fixed on him, and speaking in an appealing tone to Carroll.

"Perros! Dogs! Cowards! Where—where is she?" hissed Joaquin.

The voice of the Californian was yet low and husky, but it was louder than at first. It was heard by the newcomer, Dennis O'Grady, who approached the spot.

"Stand by me with that stout stick of yours—I may need your help," said Champe to Dennis, in a low tone.

"Faith an' what's up, begorra? Why, here's the gentlemen I met beyant the big houl in the hills!" said the Irishman, looking at Hill and Noyes. "It's moighty per-lite they wor, to be sure. I axed 'em which way to the next town, and they bade me follow my nose to the devil!"

"We meant you no harm—we were busy hunting for a lost person," said Noyes.

"Wurra! Ye were more busy pulling at the neck of a black bottle," said Dennis. "Did either of you lose anything near by where I met you? For I found this a few steps along the path."

Dennis took a white lace handkerchief from inside his old vest.

Wild was the cry which broke from the lips of Joaquin Muriata when he saw this handkerchief. With a bound he was by the side of the Irishman, and as he tore the white tissue-like kerchief from his hand he screamed out:

"It was in her bosom this bright morning—it belongs to Maraquita! Man, if you value your life, tell me how you came with it in your hands!"

"Faith, sir, I picked it up jist close to the rail, where I met these two honest-lookin' gentlemen."

He pointed to Hill and Noyes.

"Devils! devils! have you murdered her? I will cut the secret from your hearts!" cried Joaquin, and with his huge knife clenched in his hand he sprang forward toward the gamblers.

Ordinarily, armed, as they were, those men would have fought with even chances, and much more quickly when they were two to one, but now a panic seemed to strike their souls, for both turned and fled, while Champe, as if spell-bound, stood right in the way of the infuriated man.

Up flew his armed hand, a second more and the blade of Joaquin flashed bright before his breast, but the descending hand was caught at the wrist in the strong grasp of Edward Carroll.

"Joaquin—you must not slay that man!" he said,

calmly, but sternly. "His life is mine, and I have lent it to his evil will until the fourteenth of March! Slay those whom you believe have wronged you, and I will not stay your hand or speak one word for mercy. But this wretch belongs to me."

Joaquin looked at him reproachfully, but as he released his hand he replaced his knife in its sheath.

"I will not hurt him—but those other two—they must be found," said he. "Will you come and help me to find them?"

"Yes! the cowards shall yield up their secret or their lives," said Carroll. "We will go out and look for them."

"Be jabbers they're bakin' in at the door like they'd seen ghosts outside," said Dennis O'Grady.

Sure enough, the two gamblers were seen, as they staggered in at the front of the Casino, with an appearance of intense fright visible on their faces.

Joaquin, drawing his breath hard and nerving himself for a death-struggle, again snatched his knife from its scabbard and with a still, rapid step moved toward them.

The next second, entering the door, with hair hanging in disheveled masses over shoulders laid bare by torn garments, her great eyes wild with agony and despair, her white neck scratched and bleeding as if beasts had clawed into it, a female staggered forward.

So changed—could it be the same—could it be the young, lovely, loving wife whom Joaquin Muriata had brought thither that day?

It was, and Joaquin, even as quickly as the two cowering wretches who fled back from her approaching presence, recognized her:

"Maraquita—my Maraquita!" he cried, and he extended his open arms, as he hurried toward her.

"Back! back! Touch me not, Amor Mio!" she cried, and she waved her white hands, scratched and torn like her beautiful neck, "back, I am lost—I am lost!"

He did not heed her cry—he did not wait to hear from her pale lips one word, he rushed forward and would have clasped her to his breast, but she with her left hand forcibly pushed him from her, while with her right hand she took his knife from his nerveless grasp.

"Back—till you hear me," she cried again.

Then in his own tongue, with a wild despairing tone, she spoke a few hurried words, which seemed to freeze his very soul.

He stood, his great eyes regarding her with a look of freezing horror, while she raised the glittering blade above her head, her eyes uplifted as if she sought to see the face of an avenging spirit.

"Hold—hold her hand! Do not let her kill herself."

The cry, in a voice which was recognized by twenty present, came from the lips of the supposed Irishman, and Henry Champe, forgetting all else in his hate, shouted:

"Wrestling Joe is here! Fifty thousand dollars for his head!"

He drew his own revolver as he uttered the shout, and knives and pistols were seen flashing all around at the same instant.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

Even while the wild warning cry rang from the lips of Wrestling Joe, who in his excitement forgot all caution, the knife held only for an instant, high over the head of Maraquita, fell, driven with all the force of her arm into her own breast.

And while knives were flashing over her falling form—while with a low moan of misery, unheeding all that was going on around him, Joaquin bent over her and threw his arms about her, she murmured:

"It is best, dear love. I could not live and look you in the face. God guard thee, love."

She smiled, and died, while he, speechless, in his deep, deep agony, bowed his head upon her bleeding bosom and wept—oh, how bitterly.

Wept while twenty men sprang forward to earn the reward offered by Henry Champe; wept while the gambler and others rushed over her body and his to attack the undaunted wrestler, who with his short stick in his

hand defended himself from blows that came from a dozen hands at once, felling every man who approached him.

"Shoot him down—shoot him down!" yelled Champe, and he aimed his own revolver full at the head of the brave man.

A bullet shattered it the next second, and his pistol, exploding as it fell, dropped at his feet, while his own yell of agony rung through the air.

It was Carroll who fired—it was Carroll now who thrusting Joe back shouted to the others:

"Cowardly dogs, fire on one you cannot harm! Strike for a breast you cannot pierce!"

Bellows, Gilroy, and a dozen sturdy miners were beside Carroll in another minute, but Wrestling Joe was not one to shield himself behind those who would aid him. He sprang forward among the thickest of the gamblers that pressed toward him, his cudgel falling heavy and fast, but a flashing knife was seen descending upon him, and his cudgel dropped from a wounded arm.

It was a fearful moment, for the ruffians Hill and Noyes now rushed to the front, each uttering a shrill cry of encouragement to Champe who was falling back.

Wild, more wild than the cry of a maddened panther now rose a yell upon the air, and both the last-named gamblers saw Joaquin rise like an avenging demon from the dead body of his wife. He rose with the knife-lade which was reeking from her veins and dashed madly at these men—singling these only out from all the rest.

"Diablos! Diablos!" he shouted, as he struck fiercely right and left, literally cleaving his way toward them as they turned to escape him. "Diablos!" he shouted again, and they could fly no further, for they had turned toward the wall instead of the door in their haste.

"*Por mi esposa Muerte!*—for my dead wife!" he shouted again, and this time he reached the forehead of the two and half-severed the arm thrown out in guard.

He spoke no more—he had both gamblers cornered, and they fought for dear life. It was a mad, wild fight, but over almost as soon as commenced, for heedless of two terrible blows from them, he rushed in and drove his knife to the hilt first into the heart of one, then into the heart of the other.

"Vengeance! Vengeance!" he yelled, as they fell dead, and he turned to mingle again in the strife.

It was a strife no longer. The gamblers were falling back, he saw Champe on the floor, with Pepito, the dwarf, jumping like a demon on his breast, he saw Edward Carroll bearing Wrestling Joe off in his arms as if he was a helpless child, Gilroy, Bellows, and twenty or more miners were sweeping the gamblers in a crowd from the hall—then his eyes fell on poor dead Maraquita, his wronged, dead wife.

He bent over her body, he raised it in his arms, he ran with it from the place accursed where she had perished, he knew not, cared not whither. He rushed out, and the cold rain fell on his bare, hot head, the wild wind whistled around his form, and he ran on—on, until he heard the roar of the rushing river close before him.

Panting and breathless, he paused, for he heard the sound of rushing footsteps close behind him.

"Cowards, come on!" he shouted, in his own tongue. "Joaquin Muriata lives but to slay."

"We are friends!" cried one in Spanish.

It was the dwarf who spoke.

"Yes, we are friends. It is I, Don Eduardo, who tell you so. I am carrying a man who is stunned and senseless to his boat, which must be near," said Carroll.

"It is here—it is here. Oh, if he is not killed bring poor Joe to me!" cried Maggie, from the river-side. "I have waited all this long, long night."

There was only a moment of delay, and the light of a lantern, one of the bull's eye kind, used by the police, shone out. It was carried by the dwarf, and it revealed the form of Edward Carroll, supporting the inanimate body of Wrestling Joe, who had lost his false hair and beard in the late combat, and now appeared deathly pale, for he had lost blood from several wounds.

"Is he mortally hurt?" cried Maggie, as she bent over the body which Carroll laid gently in the boat.

"No—no. A blow from the butt of a pistol in the hands of one of the gamblers struck him under the ear and he is

senseless yet. But he breathes and will soon recover. His other wounds are slight. Do not tell him who brought him here. I will retire before he sees me. Joaquin, go you in the boat with them to their hiding-place. There you can give your loved one burial. Then live for vengeance, even as I do!"

Carroll said no more, but vanished away up the river-bank in the darkness among the trees, for the eyes of Wrestling Joe were opening, and he did not wish him to recognize who had borne him from the bloody melee, and placed him in safety.

Mechanically, as if more in obedience to orders than because he wished to do it, Joaquin took up the body of his wife, and laid it in the bow of the boat. The next instant the dwarf stepped in, seized the oars, pushed off, closed his lantern, and shot out on the rushing river with the skiff.

"How came I here? What is the matter with me?" asked Joe, bewildered, for he scarcely realized his position or condition.

"Do not speak—we will soon be where all can be told!" said Maggie. "Rest your head here—you are hurt, but not dangerously!"

"The camp—I remember! I was in the Casino—they found me out, and we had a terrible tussle. The brave Mexican—and his beautiful wife were there!"

"Joaquin and Maraquita are here," said a deep, mournful voice in the bow of the boat.

"Then she lives—my warning cry saved her," said Joe, eagerly.

"She is dead. She scorned life, as the pure ever will, when dishonor darkens all its beauty. She lived for me—she died—oh, Dios—why am I here—when her soul shrieks for vengeance. Haste, Pepito—hasten to the shore. I would bury her, then speed away on my mission of revenge!"

The dwarf replied not, though he heard the words of Joaquin.

He was busy scanning the outlines of the cliffs above, that he might recognize the landing-place they had left, and reach the sheltering cave where they had taken refuge before.

In a little while it was found, and by this time Wrestling Joe was so far recovered that he could help himself, as well as assist Maggie in landing.

Joaquin came last upon the shore, carrying, even cold and pulseless as it was, his dearest treasure on the earth.

It had been a long, a wild, eventful night, but now they were for the time at least in a place of quiet and of safety.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LETTER OF WARNING.

Raving from pain of body, as well as from raging agony of mind, at new disappointments in his rascally plans, Henry Champe made even his vile companions shudder at the fearful language and the horrible blasphemies which left his lips while the surgeon was dressing his wounds.

"Men!" said he, and he added an oath, too dark and terrible to be repeated. "Men, if that infernal wrestler and the Mexican imp aren't found and brought where I can see 'em swing inside of four-and-twenty hours, I'll cut adrift from every mother's son of you, bag my capital, and set the Vigilantes on your track! You've heard me, and it's sworn to, so you know what to do! Hallo—what's up now?"

"A letter for you, Hank Champe, from Mr. Edward Carroll: and if you know when you are well off you will heed its contents," said Fred Bellows, who entered and tossed a paper on the cot where Hank Champe was sitting.

"I suppose Ned Carroll thinks he'll boss this camp," growled the gambler, in a much lower tone than he had been using.

Bellows made no reply, but turned on his heel and left the cabin.

"Open the letter and read it, Carey, you are a better scholar than I," said Champe. "We'll see what the scolarly cove has got to say."

The confederate opened the letter, and read its contents aloud.

"HENRY CHAMPE:—As I intend to make a somewhat longer stay in this camp, and am rather particular as to the atmosphere I breathe, I have concluded that you and your gang have poisoned the air about here long enough.

"I give you one night and one day—four and twenty hours in all, to pay your debts, collect your claims, pack your traps, and leave. You dare not hesitate or disobey; I have backing, to sustain my orders—even if I had not, you dare not stay when I bid you go. Put distance between us for the fourteenth of March is coming.

"In the bitterest bonds of eternal hate, your enemy,

"EDWARD CARROLL."

"Read it again," gasped Champe, in a bewildered way.

"I'm bothered if I understand it."

Carey re-read the letter, slowly and distinctly.

"Leave—I and all my party? Is that what he means?" said Champe, huskily.

"It is what he says!" said Carey. "You ought to know whether he means it or not."

"He does mean it," said Champe, with a fearful oath.

"But I haven't gone yet. No—nor I won't if you boys will stand by me."

"Will it pay to stay and fight?" asked Carey, in a dubious tone. "Dead men can't come to life again. I don't care about taking the track Hill and Noyes set out on."

"You're a coward, Carey—you're a coward."

"Hank Champe, you know that is false. But I'm not fool enough to risk my life, and stand a big chance of losing it, just to please you, or advance your aims. Show me how it will pay, and I'll fight, where you will only bluster."

"Carey talks sense. If we're to fight shovel out your dust to pay us for our risk," cried another, and his remark brought an approving echo from nearly every gambler in the room.

"I'll go. I've backed and staked you all from the start, and now you turn like dogs as you are. I'll leave to-morrow, with my pile, and you can go or stay," said Champe, gloomily.

"We'll go to the bay with you—the miners here are all siding with Carroll and Gilroy," said one of his friends.

"Or else go to the new diggings over on the Stanislaus," said another.

"We'd better keep away from there. That Joaquin hails from that section. I saw him and a party of his friends there before I came here to squat!" said Champe.

"We had better all go to the bay for a while. I have to leave one bit of game unfinished here, but I'll lay a plan to carry that out yet. If I could get Carroll out of my way all would go well enough as it is. But at the bay I can rally a hundred men, where not ten can be found here to answer to my call. Doctor, give me something to string up my nerves and help me bear this cursed pain."

The surgeon prepared another dose of stimulant, and Champe became more quiet and resigned, rather than more boisterous under its effects.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REASON FOR HIS HATE.

"In spite of all his braggart boasts, Bully Hank and his gang of thieves and cut-throats are preparing to leave," said Gilroy, gleefully, to Bellows, an hour or two after Carroll had sent his mandate to the gambler. "It will lessen my profits as to table rent, but it will add to the peace of my place, so many will come who now stay away."

"He will go, but I do not think it will be the last that we shall see of him," said Fred. "He is very rich, and his money will buy adherents among the desperate villains who swarm in the settlements below, too lazy to work and too poor to live without labor. Mark me, that as soon as he is strong enough he will return. I heard him swear that he would possess La Belle Oreana, and he is not one to give up any game he starts upon while there is any way of accomplishing his object."

"He will fail there. She is pure as snow. Dignity is enthroned on every look. More than all, this strange man, Carroll, though he seems to make no claim as friend or relative, and never since their first short interview has spoken to her alone, is on the alert for her protection. He told me she would close her engagement here, then go to the bay and take passage for her home, wherever it may

be. The miners have literally made her rich with presents, though she has only spoken to them in song. She seems only to live for the child, Indice, the beautiful boy."

"He is a sweet child. Have you ever noticed that he resembles any one?"

"It seems to me I have—but hush! here comes Carroll—I do not like to speak of her when he is present."

"Good-day, gentlemen," said Carroll, and as much of a smile as was ever seen on his pale, sad face brightened it now. "For a wonder at this season we have gentle winds and soft sunshine."

"Yes, sir. Nature smiles, not over the bloody deeds of last night, but because some of the fiends who disgrace humanity are about to leave this place."

"Ay, Champe's men are out buying up all the mules they can get. He knows me too well to stay when I bid him go. I soon shall follow him. His career on earth is drawing to a close. He has fled from place to place to avoid me—tried to secrete himself from me, but I have never let him go where I could not follow—never have lost trace of him since I took an oath to hunt him down to death."

"You must have a bitter reason thus to hate him."

"I have. I never parade my wrongs or griefs or breathe them unto other ears. I have suffered, perhaps as much as any one could suffer, and yet live—in body and in mind. I have not sought sympathy, and I despise pity. But—once, when borne down by a hundred fiendish foes, hunted and crushed to earth, that devil—I will not call him man—sought to add to the agony of what I believed to be my dying hour. I never have forgiven him—I never will. And on the anniversary of that wild, fearful day, he shall perish like a dog. I have sworn it—he knows my oath is registered on high, and I will keep it."

Rapidly, his flushed face giving token that he felt all he said, this statement fell from Carroll's lips.

Gilroy and Bellows listened, for they hoped to learn more of this strange man's history from his own lips.

But he did not gratify their unexpressed desire. He walked to and fro with a quick, firm tread, for some time and then left the Casino.

The two men sat down to a game of dominoes to while away the time. The servants were nearly all asleep—their customers at work. The day was ever their dulllest time.

When Carroll left the Casino he went out with no special destination in his mind. He wished to be alone—alone that he might think undisturbed.

He wandered from amid the tents and cabins, crossed the great gulch, passing the busy miners at their work, and kept on up a small ravine west of the busy place until he reached a grove of pines. Here on a mossy rock, close beside a little spring-brook, he sat down to think and dream.

The day wore on. He rose, drank from a little eddy whirling in the rock-bound stream, bathed his hot head, and turned back toward the camp.

Suddenly he saw Fred Bellows coming toward him.

"Mr. Carroll," said the latter, "I saw the lady known as La Belle Oreana, go out to take a walk, as she does only when the sun is shining. She went toward the grove of pines to our left. A few moments ago Champe and one of his worst ruffians went nearly in the same direction. I was about to follow them, when I saw you coming, and deemed it best to tell you."

"You are kind, and I thank you," said Carroll, glancing at the grove of stunted pines to the east, at which Fred had pointed.

"Did she go alone?" he continued.

"No, sir—she had her little boy along, and I heard him prattling to her as they passed. I never saw a lovelier child."

A frown darkened the face of Carroll at mention of the child, and he seemed about to say something, when a wild, piercing scream reached their ears. It came sharp and shrill from the pine grove on the hill.

Carroll did not speak, but like a tiger in its wild rage, with glaring eyes he rushed toward the grove, followed by Bellows as rapidly as he could run.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HANGING.

"Mamma—dear mamma, are there not birds, pretty birds, where the trees grow and the sun shines?"

"Yes, dear Indice," said the fond mother, and she pressed her lips to the white brow of her lovely boy.

"And flowers, too, dear mamma?"

"Yes, my darling, yes, both birds and flowers."

"I love birds and flowers, mamma—they are so like you," said the boy.

"Darling! It is cruel to house you up when the sun is shining and the winds are soft and low. We will go and hear the birds and pick sweet flowers."

The lady threw a light shawl over her shoulders, a veil above her wealth of hair, and putting a jaunty velvet hat upon the sweet boy's head, took him by the hand and went forth. She glanced around after she had left the cabin door, letting her eyes rest a moment on the busy scene as far as eye could reach in the ravine, and then seeing no one astir between her and the grove upon the hill she slowly walked that way.

The child, so joyous in the open air, talked merrily as they went on, and her own cheeks flushed and her eyes grew brighter for the glad sunlight, the breeze and the sweet breath of flowers which came upon it.

She went on, and soon they came to the grove, where singing birds and flowers springing fresh and sweet from the effect of recent rains, made the little one almost wild with joy. Breaking from his mother's hand, he ran here and there like a frisking lamb, and the mother carolled forth her joy in songs as she wandered on further and further into the grove.

Suddenly she came to the edge of a steep cliff, and as she looked over into the deep gulch below with a shudder turned to call her boy to her side that she might guard him from danger.

As she turned a chill came to her heart, for between her and the boy stood two men. One with his arm in a sling she instantly recognized as the brutal gambler who had been hurled to the floor by Wrestling Joe on the night of her debut—the other looked equally brutal and even more able to work a wicked will, since he seemed free from wounds.

Both were armed, as, indeed, were all men, in those days, all over California.

"Indice!" she cried to her child, with a forced calmness.

"Indice—run here to mamma."

"The men, mamma—the black, bad men," screamed the child, standing terror-stricken and afraid to pass them.

"Come—come to me," she cried, and she herself advanced.

The child ran to meet her, but at a word from Champe the ruffian who was with him seized it and raised it in his strong arms.

The child was literally dumb with terror, and turned as white as the flowers it held in its tiny hand.

"Ruffian, put down that child!" cried the mother, her indignation growing stronger than her fear.

"Hard names will not better your case, madam," said Champe, in a sneering tone. "Unobserved, except by us, you have wandered so far from the camp below that no cry of yours can reach a friendly ear. And if you make a loud noise I'll put it out of your power to continue the same. I am good on enforcement of the gag-law. As to the child, no harm shall reach him if you will listen to reason. If you don't I shall order my friend to tumble him off the cliff by which you stand!"

"And he'll obey orders pretty as the kid is," said the brutal man, who held the frightened boy in his strong grasp.

"Do you want my money, my jewels? Give me the boy, and let me go free, and you shall have them!" cried the woman, white in her agony of fear.

"Money? Jewels?"

The gambler laughed hoarsely as he used these words.

"I've got loads of money and pearls, emeralds, and diamonds that a queen would be proud to wear."

"Then stand away and bid that man put down my child. I wish to go back to my room."

"Not yet, madam, not yet. There is a bargain to be made between you and me before you leave this spot, or touch the child you love. I am compelled to leave this camp. You must go with me!"

"Never—never, wretch!" cried the lady, her eyes flashing wild with anger.

"Never is a long, long time, and wretch is a hard word. Yet with me neither amounts to anything from your lips. Now hear me! Unless you consent to go with me to-morrow I will first have that child hurled to instant death, and then—then, madam, you shall be made but too willing to go where I'll take you. Do you consent or not?"

"No—a thousand times no!" cried the lady.

"Over the cliff with the brat! then help me to bring her to terms!" cried the gambler, angrily.

The man advanced toward the fearful brink, and the mother, uttering one wild, ear-piercing scream, sprang upon him, and sought to tear the child from his arms.

The ruffian hurled her away, but quick as thought she was upon him again, her slender fingers clutched in his heavy beard, as she strove to turn him away from the precipice toward which he bore the child.

"Thunder!—Champe, either knock her senseless or tear off her grip," cried the man. "She is digging her nails into my jugular."

"Over with the brat—I'll settle her!" cried the brute, as he rushed up to aid the wretch.

Another scream broke from that helpless woman's lips, and then she heard two heavy, crunching blows.

Her child, to which she clung, was in her arms, and both the gamblers were at her feet ere she could draw a second breath.

"Tone, you are safe. Go back to your room, and leave us to deal with these coward dogs!"

It was Edward Carroll who spoke.

One look—oh, how gratefully a look can speak—and without a word she clasped her boy to her bosom and turned swiftly away, and hurried toward her cabin.

"See her safe to her cabin, Mr. Bellows, and return here with a stout piece of rope—three or four yards long let it be."

Bellows bowed and hurried on with the lady, while Carroll turned to the gamblers, who yet lay stunned with the blows which had felled them—blows from the heavy butt of his pistol—and unbuckling their belts, disarmed them.

Tossing their weapons over the cliff, so close at hand, he waited for them to recover, and for Bellows to return.

Both became conscious long before Fred came back.

Champe was the first to open his eyes, for he had fallen on his wounded arm, and intense agony brought him out of insensibility.

"Attempt to rise before I give you leave and I'll shatter your other arm!" said Carroll, coolly, as Champe gained a sitting composure. "I will not kill you till your day of doom arrives. I have work for you to do yet. Not such work as you delight in, not such coward work as that I foiled you in just now, but you will know soon enough what it is. Ah, your tool here is coming to! What is his name?"

"Swoops, Mr. Carroll, Bill Swoops!"

"A very nice name for a blackleg!" said Carroll, "and now, Mr. Swoops, sit up by the side of your master in iniquity, but don't try to rise. If you do I shall send you down below without giving you time to pray, if you ever do pray."

The ruffian saw the cocked revolver, and the eye which fell upon him, and did not offer to rise.

"What do you mean to do with us?" gasped Champe, as he saw Bellows coming with a long piece of stout rope in his hands.

Carroll made no answer to him.

"Mr. Bellows, you will do me the favor to take this stout thong and tie the hands of Mr. Swoops behind him! Also bind his legs together."

Carroll pointed to the ruffian who had held the child.

"Offer to resist, Mr. Swoops, and I will put it out of your power," he continued.

Swoops looked at the pistol so very near his head, and put his hands back to be tied.

"Now, Fred, make a good slipping noose—a hangman's knot, if you know how."

Fred did know how, and it was made in a moment.

"Mr. Champe, with that well hand of yours, place this noose over the neck of your friend, Mr. Swoops."

"Mercy alive, Mr. Carroll! What do you mean?" gasped the gambler. "You are not going to hang him?"

"No; I am not, but you are! You have led him into this scrape, and now you shall let him out of it. Put that noose over his head, sir. Get up and do it, or I will slice off both your ears close to your head."

Champe saw Carroll lay his hand on his knife. He knew there was not an instant for delay. With a groan he rose, and taking the noose he slipped it over the neck of his companion in many a dastard crime.

The latter did not speak, but he looked as if he thought there would only be an attempt to scare him, and he thought he would show game, and not satisfy them by asking life.

"Fred, as Champe has but one hand, and cannot knot very well, you will have to aid him in executing his friend!"

"Heaven knows I'm willing!" said Bellows; "but I'd rather help to hang him!"

"We'll see who hangs, if I ever get the ears of the committee," growled Champe.

"Take the end of this rope and fasten it out on yonder limb, Fred," said Carroll, and he pointed to a limb which jutted out over the cliff.

Fred hurried to do it, and as he made it fast it drew the noose close around the neck of the gambler, Swoops.

The latter stood near the cliff, and now it began to look as if his fate was not a matter of jest—that something far more serious than a scare was intended.

He had not much time left for thought.

"If you think a prayer will help you, pray, Mr. Swoops, for your time has come," said Carroll, sternly, when the strong rope was securely fastened to the out-jutting limb.

"For Heaven's sake, you wouldn't hang me without a trial?" gasped the man at last, really frightened.

"You have been tried, convicted, sentenced," said Carroll, sternly. "I have been your judge. Your friend shall be your executioner. Henry Champe, I give him three minutes for prayer. At the end of that time you will push him off the cliff. Even crippled though you are, it will be an easy job, for he is bound, and cannot resist."

"I'll never do it!" cried Champe, shaking from head to foot.

"Bellows, draw your knife!" said Carroll, stepping in the rear of Champe, who stood by the side of Swoops. "You will use its point, as I shall use mine, to tickle Mr. Champe in the ribs while he moves forward with his friend. Be careful not to touch a vital part, for I cannot spare him till the fourteenth day of March arrives. Now, forward, Mr. Champe—forward, with your friend. Embrace him with a loving clasp, with that strong, sound arm of yours, and forward!"

Champe uttered a howl of agony, for two knife points entered a tender part of his body at the same moment, and he turned, unarmed as he was, to resist.

As he did so the knife of Carroll flashed so close to one of his ears that he felt the skin abraded.

"Face about, or both your ears shall go!" cried Carroll, sternly.

Champe turned. He dared not do otherwise.

"Put your arm about the waist of Mr. Swoops."

Champe did so; he knew that to hesitate was to suffer some new agony.

"Don't, Hank, don't help 'em do this," implored Swoops, in a piteous tone.

"How can I help it? They'll butcher me by inches if I don't," groaned Champe, and the sweat oozed out in streams from his forehead.

"I'll haunt you, Champe—I'll haunt you," yelled the gambler, as Champe's arm was placed about him in obedience to a second order from Carroll.

"Over the cliff with him, even as at your bidding he was about to throw the helpless child," cried Carroll.

"Mercy!" cried Swoops and Champe in one breath, one piteous appeal.

"Forward!"

That was all Carroll said, but even as he spoke Champe felt the knife points in his flesh, and with a cry of despair and terror he hurled his comrade off the cliff.

A yell, a heavy thud, and the strong limb quivered with the great weight which fell.

Champe dared not look down. He saw the shaking limb; he knew what swung below, and pallid, he shook from head to foot in terror.

"That is pretty well. You like to play a hangman's part, don't you? I think you tried it once before," said Carroll, bitterly. "Now go to your pals in the camp and tell them what you've done. Tell them you led a man into crime and then swung him off for not succeeding. Tell any tale you like. Go, hangman, go, why do you tarry?"

"You'll shoot me when my back is turned," said Champe, now more than ever frightened.

"Fool! It is not yet the fourteenth day of March. Go!"

Champe did not wait for another word. He fled back to his cabin as swiftly as he could go to tell such tale as best he could, to account for the absence of Swoops. For he dared not tell the truth. Bad as were his companions, he knew they would scorn him with a bitter hate if they knew he had aided in the hanging of his own friend. With souls blackened as they are with crime, there is one good point among gamblers. They are faithful to each other in the hour of trouble.

CHAPTER XX.

PAYING HIS DEBTS.

The dawn of another day came, but not with soft sunlight as it had on the previous day. A drizzling rain fell, and it soaked down the rocks and pattered on the leaves, while the wind sung a dreary note through the gulches and among the pines.

Pepito had lighted a fire before the dawn, and Maggie had cooked breakfast early. For Wrestling Joe had decided that he would drop down the river, and either go to San Francisco or to some of the other diggings, where life would not be in so much peril as it would be while he remained in that vicinity.

"It is a dreary day to travel in, but all the more safe," said Joe as he stood on the river-bank and glanced up and down the stream.

A wild, shrill whistle attracted his attention, and looking through the mist he saw the figure of a man, armed with a gun, standing directly opposite.

He knew the man did not mean immediate harm, else he would have used the gun. He was indeed within long pistol range.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he asked, for he saw that he was recognized.

"Joaquin! Come to me and come alone, or only with Pepito," answered the man whom Joe now recognized, more by his voice than otherwise.

For he was dressed in a different garb than that which he wore when he had seen him last, and he seemed literally loaded down with arms.

"What can I do for you?" asked Joe.

"Nothing—but I have a sight to show you. I want you to see how Joaquin can pay his debt of vengeance!" replied the other.

"We will go over. The poor man may have lost his reason," said Joe.

Telling Maggie not to fear, but remain there in quiet, he and Pepito now launched the skiff and rowed across.

"I had two reasons for wishing you to cross," said Joaquin, when they were over, and had taken his extended hand. "I wish my men to see you, that they may never harm you, if they should meet you elsewhere, and I wanted you to see me give my first lesson to my hated enemies!"

"Your men?" said Joe, and he looked around. "Is your head turned, my good Joaquin?"

"No—nor will it be while I have strength to strike a foe. You looked to see my men. They are near—would you like to look at them? They are so near that your body would be riddled with their balls if I made a sign to have it done—so near that when I tell them you are my friend and harm must never reach you each one will mark your forms and features."

"They'll not forget mine—I am so beautiful," said Pepito, with a bitterness of tone and spirit peculiar to most men who are deformed.

"Where are they?" asked Joe, still thinking Joaquin had become to some degree demented.

A sharp, peculiar whistle left the lips of Joaquin.

The next second, rising like magic from behind rocks and bushes, fully thirty men, armed with guns, pistols, and knives, like their leader, appeared within half-pistol shot of where they stood.

They were dark, desperate looking men—some full Mexicans, others of Indian blood, and some more light in complexion than Joaquin himself.

Silent and motionless they stood, while Joaquin spoke in the Spanish tongue.

"These two are my friends," he said to his band. "Mark them well, for instead of ever offering harm you must hereafter aid them, if it be in your power so to do. Now to your posts upon the roadside, and wait for me and my signal."

An instant more and the men were gone.

"They are not many yet. But they are brave and will obey," said Joaquin. "How well, you soon will see—for before another hour goes by a party will attempt to pass above. But one will ever go on—and none will live to return."

"What party?" asked Joe, in wonder.

"The gamblers from the camp, with Champe at their head, and with a train of mules laden with gold, and their traps. They have been forced to leave. Their journey will be short. Come with me, not to join in the work, but to see it done."

Joe did not hesitate. He hated Champe and his gang too bitterly not to be willing to see evil come upon them. Pepito gloried even more in the thought that a fearful day of punishment was at hand, that those who had so often abused him were now to receive such mercy as they had been wont to render.

They therefore followed Joaquin through the woods to the trail near half a mile from the river, and at his desire took post upon a bush-covered hill which overlooked a short turn made to the south, though they could see up the trail for fully a half-mile before the turn was made.

Half of Joaquin's men with guns in hand stood behind the bushes at this turn. A hundred yards or more to the east, in the bushes close beside the trail, crouched the rest.

Midway between, sitting on a rock where, when he rose, both parties could hear and see him, Joaquin took his post, to wait for those who, by his spies, he knew would come.

"Good place. He'll kill all who come!" said Pepito, and he crouched down by the side of Wrestling Joe.

"I hope only those will come who merit death!" said Joe. "Champe and his gang I would not spare, but I do not like to see murder done, or even robbery. Yet we will stay—ah! I see the heads of mules far up the pass—they come—they come!"

"Yes, they come to die!" said Pepito. "My heart leaps high to think how soon brave Joaquin begins his work of vengeance. I will join in the work if he will but have me!"

"Be still, and let us watch. The gamblers come in moody line. They do not sing or chat as when in camp," said Joe.

"Champe is at the head, grim and black, as if he had lost a bank. He'll lose all now."

And Pepito chuckled at the thought.

The line came on, so close that the mules touched as they crowded on.

Champe rode past the first ambush—past the rock where Joaquin reclined, almost to the bend, and not a sound reached his ears to warn him or his men of the peril now so very near.

"They'll let him pass. What does it mean?" said Joe, as he saw Champe reach and turn the bend in the road.

"No, no! he is down. They've dragged him from his horse, and now—they fire!" cried Pepito. "Look—oh, Santa Maria! how they go down all in a heap before the riddling balls. Those who are not down now turn to fly. The other men are up—their volley comes. Dios! it is murder—it is murder now."

The dwarf shuddered, much as he had wished to see the gamblers punished, for he saw them go down, slain to a man without a chance to defend themselves, so complete was the surprise, so close the ambush.

"I cannot stay here—I must go down and speak to Joaquin!" said Joe, and he hurried to the bend in the trail, where Joaquin was standing, while his men attended to the plunder.

Champe, alone unharmed, of all his band, stood disarmed before the Californian.

"Dog!" said the latter, "I had your life spared, not because you deserved mercy, but because my friend, your enemy, holds it as his own. I would not take from him the right of doom he holds. Your life belongs to Don Eduardo Carroll. Go tell the people whom you meet that Joaquin is in the hills—his business is revenge. To rob, to slay, these are the pastimes of Joaquin and his men! No trail henceforth is safe—we will strike for vengeance everywhere. Begone—thou art a beggar now. We hold all your gold, and your companions have no further need. Of all your party you alone are left alive. Go! or I'll make my men scourge you on."

"Go, brave Master Champe!" hissed the dwarf. "Pepito laughs at you!"

"Go, and beware of March fourteenth!" cried Wrestling Joe, who had before seen the effect of those words upon him.

The gambler, on foot, without arms, or an ounce of gold, staggered along the trail, completely broken down. His ill-gotten gains were lost—his friends had perished—it seemed as if his day was darkening into night, indeed.

CHAPTER XXI.

NEED OF HASTE AND SECRECY.

Wrestling Joe almost pitied the wretch as he staggered on, he seemed so completely beaten down in mind and body. But Pepito, who had a thousand kicks, and blows, and bitter curses to remember, danced in glee, and as he looked on the bodies strewed around, laughed his bitter hate.

The calmest man of all was Joaquin. His men had gathered all the spoil—he had not touched an ounce of gold.

"So many lives for one. My Maraquita shall be well avenged before I cease my work!" cried Joaquin. "Now, friends, you have seen what I have wished you should see. We will part, you to go your way, and I mine. You will hear from me often, and you may sometimes see me. You need never know me unless I am the first to speak, and thus show you I am willing to be known. Go, now, good friends—go, and do not linger in these hills. Henceforth they who travel here will go at the peril of their lives. I am at war with all; my heart is full of bitterness, and vengeance is my cry!"

Joaquin turned away and gave a signal. His men scattered away over the hills, and were gone from sight in a moment.

"We, too, must be gone. It would be death for us to be found here," said Joe to the dwarf. "As it is that villain, Champe, will doubtless report us as among the band who slew his friends and took his gold. The sooner we leave these parts the better will it be for us."

Joe and Pepito rapidly retraced their steps to the river-bank, and crossed over to their camp.

Poor Maggie was terribly frightened, for she had heard the firing, and she feared her friends would never come back. But her heart was still again when she saw them cross, and she listened to the story told of Joaquin and his vengeful band with eager interest.

"And now pack up, my good girl, the little you have to pack, for we must leave this spot," said Joe, when he had concluded his narration. "The danger which kept me most anxious has passed from the camp above. The villain Champe is no longer in a position to carry out his threats to annoy one whom I could not protect; and I can leave her without fear. Pack up, good girl, while I prepare a small stock of eatables, and Pepito gets the boat ready."

It took but little time for them to make ready, and ere the hour of noon had passed the skiff with its three passengers was gliding down the rapid stream.

"We must reach the forks where the Feather joins the Yuba before Champe gets there," said Joe. "If we do not, and he should see us before we pass, he would be sure to give us trouble. There are too many of his class in that settlement for our safety."

"If he is yet on foot we will be far ahead of him," said Pepito. "For it is fully fifteen miles by land, and he cannot have traveled more than five of them. The river bends will make it more for us, but the current runs swiftly here, and we are going fast."

"What is that?" asked Maggie, pointing to a moving object on a bluff not far ahead.

"Most likely it is Champe—it is a man, and his gaze is turned this way," said Joe. "The river runs close to the traveled trail around that bluff."

The skiff swept on, and soon they were so close that they could recognize as well as meet the recognition of the villain Champe, for it was he.

Unarmed he could only scowl down his rage and bellow out a useless curse as they swept by inside of pistol shot.

On amid swirling eddies and over rough, rippling bars, the stout skiff sped, and soon through the drizzling mist the houses, sheds, and tents of the new town of Marysville were in sight.

Pepito at the oars, drew the skiff close in on the southern bank under cover of the windows, which lined the shore, and it seemed as if they would have the fortune to pass the place unseen. For no mining was going on there. It was a busy point of trade—no more, no less.

Silent but watchful the occupants of the boat crouched low as it rustled by the overhanging limbs, and soon they saw the even swifter current of the Feather rushing on to join the Yuba in its seaward journey.

A half-hour more and they were safe from observation at that point at least. But the farther down they went the thicker would the settlements be met, and they knew that haste and secrecy must yet be used for the confederacy to which Champe belonged was strong in all the settlements.

On swept the boat, the point aimed was reached before the shades of night fell dark upon them, and when at last they drew to shore to camp and rest it was upon the broad Sacramento's tule-covered shore.

"We are now safe!" said Joe, when some distance inland, he lighted a fire whereby they could warm their chilled bodies. "We can hide by day and move by night, and in two days more will reach the great city, where either in disguise or out I can find friends who will protect us all."

"Will Champe come there?" asked Pepito.

"Without capital to run a bank, I hardly think he will," said Joe. "He can do better in the mines, for with but a petty start his tricks will soon place him in funds again. Yet, to avoid the man he dreads, he may go down to the bay. We will soon see."

"I hope he will. I want to torment him more!" said the dwarf. "If I can only keep him within reach I shall be happy. I would like to stamp upon him every day as long as he lives. To howl out my hate in his ears."

"Hark—hark, I hear the dash of oars!" said Maggie.

Wrestling Joe in an instant put out the fire which he had kindled, while both he and Pepito listened to the sounds.

"Yes—a boat is on the river—rowing down," said Joe. "Most likely Champe is searching for us on the water. Be silent—he will pass. The skiff is too well hidden for any eye to find it."

"Hark!" said Maggie again. "They are not rowing now. Oh, if they are upon our track—if our boat should be discovered!"

"We would teach them a bitter lesson, Maggie!" said Joe, in a low tone. "Both I and Pepito are well armed. You too wear pistols at your waist."

"They are landing, not far below," said the dwarf. "I hear them plainly in the reeds."

"Yes—perhaps they mean to camp. If they do I'll show them a trick I learned upon the prairies long ago," said Joe, in a whisper.

The trio listened anxiously, for they could hear the voices of the men whoever they might be, not many rods away. They could not make out the import of their talk,

but they fancied that the hoarse, thick voice of Champe was one among those they heard.

Soon the sight of a light proved that a camp-fire had been lighted, and now Joe realized what would be his peril at the dawn of day if these were indeed men in search of him, with Champe to control them.

"I wish the wind would rise and blow a hurricane," he said. "It will be hard work to creep up to that camp unheard amid the dry and rustling reeds, but it must be done. If that party is in search of us we must move from here long hours before the light of day can aid them in their search. If they are not our enemies we can spend the night in comfort and be strong for work to-morrow."

"The wind is rising. Heaven be thanked!" whispered Maggie, as in a fitful gust the wind swept through the tall reeds.

"Then keep still. I will before long return. Pepito, if you hear the cry of a bittern can you answer it?"

The cry of the bird, as if startled from the reeds, rose from the lips of the dwarf so naturally that Joe looked up. He almost listened for the rustle of wings above his head.

"That will do," he whispered. "If you hear the cry answer, so I may not miss you on my return."

"I will. I would go if you would let me, but I am too awkward to creep like you among the reeds."

"Stay here with Maggie. I will be back ere long. I shall only go near enough to know who and what they are. Their fire will lead me in the right direction, and its crackling sound, which even here can be heard, will be an aid to me."

Joe now crept away, making so little noise that only as he left them, while close in the vicinity, could they hear him at all. The wind was rising, too, and when it came in gusts it shook the reeds so much that even the watchers would start, believing that men were coming upon them in a body.

An hour at least passed by, and before any sound except the talking in the distant camp, and the rustling of reeds, shaken by the wind, was heard.

"Joe is gone very, very long," sighed Maggie. "I hope he is safe."

"If he were not we should have heard from him," said the dwarf. "Ah—that is his cry. He is coming back, and would know where we are."

The cry of the bittern, heard so often in the night, in those low swampy lands, now reached their ears.

Pepito replied in the same way—twice was the cry heard and twice replied to, and then Joe was with them.

"We must leave this place," he whispered. "Champe and ten of the worst desperadoes on the coast are camped three hundred yards below. They are drinking hard, and within an hour or two will be wrapped in drunken slumber. Then I will prepare a little lesson for them to learn, and before they wake to know its import we will be on the other shore and far below this spot. For a full half hour I lay where I could hear all they said, and even study every face. Champe swears first to find us, then to go back and wipe out all the settlement at Timbuctoo. He'll find merry work, if he undertakes the half I've heard him threaten in the camp down there. But let him talk. He'll have a blistered tongue, if my plan works right. The wind is rising as I hoped, the reeds grow dry beneath its breath, for all the wet is being driven off. When the cessation of their noise tells they are dropping off to sleep, I will set my plan at work."

"Did they seem to think us near?" asked Maggie.

"No—they think we are farther on, upon some of the islands, and were afraid they'd pass us in the night. Hark! they are almost silent now. I knew their frequent draughts would have effect before long. When all is still creep carefully to the boat with Maggie. Get in, muffle the oars, and be prepared to start when I come down. We must quickly cross the river, when I arrive, for this side will not long be tenable."

"I understand you now," said Pepito. "Come, girl Maggie—come. Follow me and soon we will be afloat again."

The girl made no reply, but when Pepito crept away she followed him.

It was easy for them to find the boat, for they had

parted the reeds as they went inland to make their camp, and to follow back the trail was all they had to do.

Soon the girl was aft in her place, and Pepito was busy muffling the oars, so that they would not rattle in the thole-pins when in use.

"Are you ready?" was heard, in a whisper, a few minutes later.

It was Wrestling Joe who asked the question as he sprang lightly into the boat.

"Ay, all ready. Shall I shove out?" said the dwarf, in the same low tone.

"Ay, the sooner now the better, before a blaze lights up the water," said Joe. "Hark! hear that, even before you see the tongues of flame."

A low roar, like the hum in a multitude, heard before a riot breaks out, or the rush of distant waters, reached their ears as Pepito took his oars.

The skiff was pushed off, and in a few seconds was on the stream.

Almost as soon a flash of light, growing each instant stronger, brighter, rose among the tules which they had left. It was dead to windward of the gamblers' camp.

CHAPTER XXII.

"IT IS HIS VOICE!"

"Lay out your strength, good Pepito!" said Joe, earnestly; "let us reach the other shore as soon as may be. Steer for that clump of trees—the river will be all alight in twenty minutes with the blaze which I have kindled."

Pepito made no reply, but bent to the oars, and the skiff flew swiftly through the parting waters.

In a very few minutes it was close in on the southern shore, beneath the outstretched limbs of trees which grew at the water's edge, and as the skiff touched the ground Joe said, in a low tone:

"We are safe from observation here. We will watch matters on the other side for a little while, and then decide what course to take."

Pepito, Maggie, and the wrestler now stood up in the boat steadying themselves by the branches which were thick above and around them, to look upon a sight all strangely new to them—at least to Maggie and the dwarf.

For now, springing as from a circle, whirling away to the right and left, like living things, the flames leaped high in the air, and louder and louder, as the real wave rolled on, came the roar of the sea of fire, like the chorus of angry voices coming on the wind.

"Are they where that fire will reach them?" asked Maggie, with a shudder.

"Yes—they must be in a drunken stupor, or the roar would reach their ears and rouse them to their danger. I now can see their boat—it is close to the line of fire as it sweeps down toward the water. I can see where they made their camp; but the tules are too high to see the canvas drawn over oars to form a shelter from the dew."

"Ah—look there—that flash is from powder which has caught—hear the report, a powder flask has just exploded. They will roast alive—it is terrible. I did not think it would do more than drive them terror-stricken to the water. They do not stir—the fire must have reached them now. Heavens, it is horrible!"

Wrestling Joe shuddered, and for an instant turned away his eyes, while higher and higher leaped the red flames, and on—on they rolled, a sea of terror.

"Oh, God of mercy! Look—look at that. It is a man—a man on fire!" screamed Maggie, wildly glaring over the water, and clutching the arm of Wrestling Joe with a nervous grasp.

He looked and saw what seemed a giant form, all clad in fire, come leaping down toward the river-side—howls of agony coming with dreadful force across the water.

"But one—and all the rest will perish in their drunken sleep. 'Tis awful—'tis worse than murder!" said Joe, and he trembled while he spoke.

On leaped the man on fire, until he reached the water, and into this he sprang as if death by it were easier than that dreadful agony of fire.

The flames swept on until for miles above and below the tules burned as prairies burn.

And every little while the man could be heard howling in his agony where he had fallen in the water's edge.

"I can stand this no longer. That man's misery is more than I can listen to," said Joe, at last. "His companions must have stifled, and died easy, but he lives, and it is terrible to hear him. I must go and help him."

Pepito pushed off the boat, took up the oars, and swiftly rowed across the stream. The flames rising from afar yet lighted up the scene enough for them to see the form of a man upon the beach, just in the shallow water—a man seemingly helpless, but groaning fearfully.

He heard the dash of water falling from the blades of the muffled oars, or the cut of the boat's sharp prow, for he rolled over as the boat came near, and cried:

"Help! help! if ye be men! I'm all a sheet of fire. I burn—oh, heavens how I burn."

"It is his voice," whispered Maggie, as Joe touched her cold hand with his.

"Yes, yes, shall I go back and leave him in this misery?" said Joe.

"He murdered my dear brother—he wrecked my young life. His curses and his blows have made my life an agony. Yet I will not say the word that bids you leave him in that dreadful misery."

"You are a woman, and your soul hath more nobleness than man could ever boast," said Joe, gently. "Maggie, you are too good—I will not be harder-hearted than you, who have such cause to hate him. Row on, Pepito, row on, we will help that man."

The dwarf had ceased to row when he heard and recognized the voice, but now he touched his oars and drove the boat upon the beach.

"Help, help!" moaned the poor wretch. "Oh, put out the fire—the dreadful fire."

"It is all out—you are drenched with the water where you lie," said Joe.

"No, no, 'tis fire—I roll in fire. My hair is all in flames—my body burns—my eyes—I cannot see. Ah, yes—yes, I see you—a man, a man—thank Heaven, for help is near."

"When Henry Champe thanks Heaven one well may wonder and believe the millennium is at hand!" said Joe, as he sprang upon the shore, and drew the blackened body of the gambler up from the water where half immersed it lay.

"That voice? Surely it is not Wrestling Joe, who lifts a hand in kindness here to me!" moaned the gambler. "Stand where the light may reach your face. Yes, 'tis he—'tis he. Man, draw that pistol from your belt and end my agony!"

"No—let him suffer yet awhile. 'Twill harden him for what is coming next," cried Pepito, in a shrill, exultant tone.

"Peace, Pepito—see how he writhes in agony. Even I feel sad to see him suffer so."

"Great heavens! That is Maggie's voice, and even she has pity for me in my misery. Dog of a dwarf—use your knife and end this scene!" almost shrieked the gambler. "Must all whom I have injured glory in my misery now!"

"All—all?" the dwarf laughed, mockingly. "But us three are here, and I have heard you count your victims by the score!"

"Peace, Pepito; help me lift him in our boat. We will take him where his wounds can be dressed. We will punish him with kindness."

"Wait an instant till I spread some clothing in the boat," said Maggie, "to lay him down upon. Oh, lift him carefully. He suffers worse than death!"

"Yes, girl—and you heap fuel on the fire. Curse me, curse me as I should be cursed by you, and I will thank you for it."

"No, Henry Champe—whom God has punished as you are punished now, it were worse than sin for mortal to attempt to curse. Pray, pray to Heaven, and do not think of us," said Maggie, in a low, soft voice.

The man moaned out some words—he knew not how to pray, then fainted in his dreadful agony.

Across the river, as soon as possible, Pepito rowed the skiff, and by a blaze made on the shore they dressed the wounds of the unconscious man as well as they could. He was burned even more shockingly than they at first real-

ized, yet it seemed as if the fire had reached no vital spot. His hands, covering his eyes, had saved them, but the flesh was so roasted that it peeled off to the very bone. His hair and beard were gone, and his bare skull glittered in the lurid light.

His clothes were in a cinder, his flesh roasted almost in every part.

"Can he live?" asked Maggie, as the chest heaved in quick, short breath.

"Yes," said Joe. "He has not sucked down the flame. His lungs are all untouched. He covered up his mouth and eyes, or else he would have died before he reached the water. He will live, but death were a mercy to what he must suffer. We will get him down where surgical help can be made available. I will pour a draught of liquor down his throat to give him strength to bear the agony."

Joe raised the head of the wretched man, and poured a cup of liquor between his blistered lips.

"Shove off, Pepito," he said, as he lifted the body to as easy a position as he could lay it in. "We will hurry to the bay and then our share is done."

The dwarf obeyed, and for hours they hurried on, Joe "spelling" the other at the oars from time to time.

Champe became conscious again, and, fed by draughts of stimulating drink, strove to bear his agony in silence.

But at times a moan, and then a scream, would break from his lips, in spite of each endeavor which he made to bear his pain.

Then Maggie, his poor victim, would lay cooling cloths wet with the cold water upon his brow and try by some gentle act to soothe his misery. Brute as he was this added to his pain, he felt that it was so undeserved by him.

The boat rowed on. Day came—they passed the Suisun Bay, the broad reach of Martinez, and below it still the bay of Petuluma—the sun went up higher and higher, and the boat kept on toward the distant hills of snowy sand which marked San Francisco to their view.

It was a weary row against both wind and tide, but when the cooling shades of night had fallen the wharves of the city were reached, and while Wrestling Joe hurried to a hospital for help to carry a new patient thither Maggie and Pepito watched. For Champe, exhausted, lay in the boat once more insensible, but breathing still.

Another hour went by, and the wretched man was in the hospital. Joe merely told a tale of rescue in the burning tules—that he had saved this man in pity, but did not say he knew who he was.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JOE HEARS BAD NEWS.

Dressed plainly, but in rich material, with her neat, handsome figure, and her sad, spiritual face, Maggie looked the lady in every sense, as she presided at the tea-table in the genteel apartments which had been taken by Mr. Joseph Caruthers, in the then aristocratic suburb of San Francisco, known as Stockton street.

Furnished rooms they were; but for that time they were as elegant as money could command, and in them Wrestling Joe and his sister, for as such he treated Maggie before the world, as well as behind its censorious eyes, with the dwarf Pepito, lived quietly, waiting such events as would enable Joe either to return to the mines, or go elsewhere to add to a store now fast diminishing.

"The news, dear brother, since you kindly let me hear you so—the news! That is what I and Pepito long for, since we go seldom out, and you go every day abroad!"

"I have Faulkner's paper here," said Joe, "but have not read it yet. Every mouth is full of Joaquin's exploits. To credit all one hears is impossible. To-day he kills a dozen men upon the Stanislaus, a few hours later he is taking life upon the swift Mokallume—then he is heard from away up in the hills where the three forks of the American come together. He would be ubiquitous if half one hears is true."

"He but fulfills his oath," said Pepito. "I do not blame him when I think of that fair woman whom he buried, and her fate. Have you heard from our invalid at the hospital, my good friend and master?"

"Yes, Pepito. He is gaining strength rapidly. As I said at first, the burns did not reach a vital point, though he has suffered more than a thousand deaths. He is fearfully scared—his hair will not come out upon the bare skull, but he can see and curse as well as ever. I heard him at it when I went near the ward to-day, to see if he were likely to be abroad before long. For when he gets out he will be sure to hunt us down. I hope that ere he is entirely well, not that I fear him, but for other reasons, we may be sailing for a more pleasant home than this. I have an engagement now, and one month's salary, with a benefit to which my terms entitle me, will place me, and you, of course, above all present want, and in a condition to seek another place for operation."

"An engagement, brother?"

"Yes; in some plays founded on the classic games of the old Roman times. In one I appear as a Wrestler, in another as the Gladiator, in a third as a Quoit Player."

"May I go to see you act, dear brother?"

"Perhaps, Maggie—we will see. But a rude class attend such theaters as we have here, and of your sex, the representatives are the worst. I know you shrink from being looked upon with rude glances and insolent thoughts."

"You are right, kindest of men—you are right—I do not wish to go. I only thought of seeing you when I spoke. Not of being seen myself by others."

"We will both go—but so well disguised no one will take us for what we are," said Pepito. "I will dress you as a squaw from the Walla-Walla, Maggie, and I am ugly enough to make a hideous papoose."

And the dwarf laughed heartily at his conceit.

"We may need disguises by and by—not now, I think," said Joe. "Ah, what is here?"

A paragraph in the paper met his eye, and both Maggie and the dwarf noticed that his face paled while he read, and an expression of inward agony passed over it.

"Bad news—I am sure it is," said Maggie, anxiously.

"I wish she had been content to go. She surely had enough without coming here to sing," he said, in a troubled tone.

"La Belle Oreana—is she coming here?" asked Maggie.

"Yes; I know she is, for on all the earth there is no other woman whose fate seems to interest you so."

And Maggie pouted while her dark eyes filled with tears.

Joe was too much absorbed in the paragraph which he was reading to notice what poor Maggie said, or how she looked.

"To-morrow night she sings. And I have three days yet to wait till I appear. Both in the same house. She cannot know that I am here. She shall not know it, if I can conceal the fact. My name is changed. I can disguise all but my form. She must be even now in town. My boy, my pretty boy, oh, how I would like to press him to my breast. And yet it may not be. I must go forth—I cannot stay within and know that she is breathing the same atmosphere."

He had muttered all these words in a low tone to himself, but the ear of Maggie had caught them all.

And when after drinking but a single cup of tea he rose and went to his private room she turned to Pepito.

"You love him, do you not, good Pepito?"

"Even as my life, and more, girl Maggie, do I love brave Wrestler Joe."

"He is going where dangers will surround him, I am afraid, Pepito."

"Then I will follow, to protect him," said the dwarf.

"And let girl Maggie go with you, brave and good Pepito?" said Maggie, coaxingly.

"Yes, if you'll dress like a boy, and carry knife and pistol," said the dwarf.

"That will I do—get you the dress all ready, and I will soon prepare with you to follow him. Try and find out in a careless way where he will be found after he goes out, that we may get on his track so as to be near if he should come to peril."

"Pepito will do this for girl Maggie. She is good, for she loves Wrestler Joe."

"Only as a sister may, Pepito—only as a sister may," said the girl, with a sigh.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CAPTAIN BLINKS.

"Gootness gracious! Mein Fader Abraham—who be you, and what wants you here?"

It needed not the hooked nose, the small, ferret-like eyes, the peaked head and narrow forehead which was linked by a thin, long, scraggy neck, to narrow, round shoulders, to tell that the speaker was one of a peculiar class of Israelites, whose business is money lending.

He was an old man, as the few white hairs struggling from beneath a scull-cap of faded velvet told, an old man, shriveled in face and form, and the voice he spoke in was dry and wheezy.

"Don't you know me, Manteufel?" said the stranger, a tall, ghostly-looking man, in a hollow but harsh voice, throwing back a cloak which enveloped his gaunt form, and showing a belt well garnished with knife and pistols.

"Himmel, no! What wants you here? Not to rob me, for I am poor, very poor—I lose all I got at de games."

"That's a lie, Manteufel—you never play. I've tried to get you to my tables many a time."

"Holy Moses! Is that you, Mister Champe? Why, you look all like a ghost."

"Oh, you do know me now, old skinflint. It is well you do, or I might bring the vigilantes down on you for that little scrape in the Yerba Buena—"

"Hush, Mister Champe, hush, you got it all up, you know. But what you want now? You peen in bad luck de way you look."

"Yes—I am just out of the hospital, and flat broke."

"Dat is pad—very pad, Mister Champe. I never wash so poor as now."

"You needn't lie to me, Manteufel. I know you too well. I want money, but I can give security. I have that big diamond yet, a dozen emeralds, and a string of pearls."

The ferret eyes of the Jew flashed as he heard these words.

"Got them yet? Well, well, Mishter Champe—poor ash I pe I have got some goot frents. I can get der monish all you want for you. You go away now, and come py-and-py, and me make dat right if you pring de chewels!"

"What is your hurry to get rid of me—you expect some one."

"Well, yes—dere is a captain mit whom I deal some-dimes. He will pe here every minite I expect. He has one clipper brig, and he sails down the coast—de Malek Adhel."

"What—Harvey Blinks, the pirate—do you expect him? The man of all the world whom I most wish to see!" cried Champe, eagerly. "I need him and such men as he leads, and if he will back me in an enterprise I'll make a hundred fortunes for him."

"Well—well, if he likes a chob he'll take it. If he don't he is more stubborn as a rock like Chibraltar. You speaks mit him yourself, for dere he comes."

Champe turned and faced a man of rather over medium height, with the look of a seaman in face and form, who wore the usual ornaments of the day, revolvers in his belt. He had a bold, careless look, but not one that would strike an observer as indicating a daring or desperate character.

"Good-evening, Captain Blinks—I'm glad to meet you once more," said Champe, as he faced the new-comer, and he extended a hand which seemed that of a skeleton—the long fingers seeming only bone.

Captain Blinks drew back and eyed Mr. Champe steadily without offering to take his hand.

"You hail as if you knew me by the cut of my jib!" he said. "But I'm foggy, or else I can't make you out!"

"You knew me well when I kept the Rialto down on the wharf," said Champe.

"What, Bully Hank? Why, your top-hamper is all cut away. You look as if you'd been in a norther, and come out shorn in spars, head-gear, and canvas. I didn't know you."

"I've just come out of the hospital. It is too long a

story to tell now. You shall hear it all by and by. I have got work for you and your men—work which will make fortunes for you all; and there's what you love, even more than money in it, there is fighting!"

"Good. I've had but little of that lately. I went down to Mazatlan a while ago for nothing else, but the Greasers run like sheep, and never made a show. What have you up?"

"The capture of a band that rolls in gold, with rewards that run up to a million at the least. Then some wholesale robbing on our own account. But first of all, a personal favor, a bit of woman-work on my own account."

"Ah, Bully Hank, you are a sad wretch among the craft that fly petticoats for colors. What can I do for you?"

"Help to cage a woman who has just come to town—I found her crib by accident an hour ago! Get her on board your craft, or in some hiding place where I can hold her at my mercy, and I'll put ten thousand dollars in your private purse."

"Good on your head. I'm your man, and ready for the work. Manteufel, have you had that plate all melted down?"

"Yes, goot Captain Blinks, yes; but dere is not half so much as what you dinks."

"We'll see, old thief, we'll see. I took the weight, and if you fool me you put a razor to your throat. Make out the weight, and do it square, or you shall swing from the yard-arm of my brig. I'll come to get the cash to-morrow morning. When do you want your job done, Bully Hank?"

"Now—right away. I would not wait an hour. She is alone and helpless now—how long she may be I cannot tell. Come with me, and if you are what I think you are we will have her in an hour where she will pray for help in vain. I swore, long months ago, to possess her, and I will—I will. Come, I will lead the way. Good-by, Manteufel, for an hour or two—then I will come for the cash."

"Come mit de chewels, den," said the Jew. "Come mit de chewels, and I will get you all you wants. Not of mine own—I'm very poor—but frents, goot frents have I when dere ish security."

"Come, heave ahead, if we've work to do," said Captain Blinks, impatiently.

"Work!" cried Champe, as he turned to Blinks. "It is the rarest bit of work you've had a hand in in all your life-time. A woman fit to be a queen—so beautiful, so haughty, and so proud. I'd rather hear her voice pleading for mercy than to own the wealth of all the Indies. She has caused me all my trouble lately, and now I'll have such revenge as would satisfy a devil in his bitterest hate. Come on—a hundred yards, not more than that, and I will show her to you."

CHAPTER XXV.

RESCUED.

In a small cottage-built house, close to the water-front of the new city, in a room whose single curtained window overlooked the bay, sat La Belle Oreana.

There were two doors to the room. One, half open, revealed a smaller room in the rear with a bed in it. The other opened on the street.

At this there was a low, timid knock, as if a child, or a feeble person, asked admittance.

The lady started to her feet. She had not heard the step of any one approaching. She paused and listened. Again the low, soft tap was heard. She went to the door and opened it, slipping back the bolt which strongly secured it on the inside.

With a fearful start, but no outcry, she strove to close the door again, for two men, muffled up in cloaks, were on the threshold.

Her action was too late—the door was thrust open with a strength she could not withstand, and she was thrown back into the middle of the room by the force thus used.

"Gentlemen would not thus intrude themselves upon a lady!" she said, haughtily, while her face flushed with indignation.

"I am not a gentleman, I am a gambler," said the taller of the two. "My friend here claims no more. He

is by profession a pirate. So be seated, madam, and try to entertain your visitors."

"The villain Champe!" gasped the lady, recognizing the disfigured wretch by his voice, his giant size, and his glaring, hateful eyes.

"Champe is my name, and your sex generally regard me as a hard old case!" he said, with a coarse laugh, advancing toward the lady, with a look which spoke the worst.

"Stand back, sir—stand back!" she cried, angrily. "Help is within my call—stand back, or it will be worse for you."

"Call if you like, and you'll see how these big hands of mine can choke. I did not come to trifle, woman—you are mine—forever mine!"

He stretched out his arms to clasp her as he spoke, but bowing her lithe form she rushed past him, seized her sleeping boy, and bounded toward the door.

"Not out this way, until you go with us!" cried Captain Blinks, roughly, putting his back against the door.

"Heaven help me!" cried the lady. "Villains, I am not friendless—beware."

"Of what? We two are a match for any ten who—look out, Blinks, I hear a step!"

Blinks had no time to profit by Champe's hasty warning, for the door was dashed open so suddenly that he was hurled into the center of the room.

"Edward—thank Heaven that you have come!" screamed the lady, and she rushed up to Edward Carroll, and threw one arm about him for support, while the other held the boy who had just opened his blue eyes.

"Down with him and out with her before more help comes!" cried Blinks, and he sprang upon Carroll with a tiger-like leap.

So suddenly, indeed, that Carroll, seldom unprepared, was stricken down, and as Champe grasped the woman by the arm the pirate dashed his knee upon Carroll's breast and drew a long dagger to finish what he had begun.

The steel flashed in the air—the lady's scream rang wildly out—she saw that he must die—then came a bound through the open door-way, the arm of the pirate was caught in its descent, and the next instant he was hurled from above the body of the fallen man with a force which sent him clear across the room, and dashed him hard against the wall.

"They are but two—why don't you stab, cut, or shoot!" cried the baffled pirate, as Carroll rose, and saw who it was that helped him—that Wrestling Joe had caught the descending blow aimed at his heart.

Champe had stood like one stupefied when Carroll rushed in, and now when he saw other forms coming to the door he cried:

"We're baffled, Blinks, we're baffled—run!"

Then at a bound, carrying sash and all in the leap, he went through the window, and was in an instant out of sight. Blinks saw his chance and followed, as two more persons rushed in at the open door.

Carroll rose to his feet, and with a grateful look approached the spot where Joe now stood, with folded arms, regarding the lady with a look full of sad expression.

"Mr. Caruthers," said Carroll, "I owe my life to you! I thank you from my heart, though life to me is little less than burdensome."

Joe turned, and looked as if he would reply, but he did not. His face was an ashen white. He trembled. But, without speaking, he left the room.

Two persons, one appeared to be a boy, the other was the dwarf Pepito, and both were armed, were in the doorway. They drew back as he went out, but did not speak, and he passed on as if they had been unseen.

"Oh, Heaven—what must I yet endure!" moaned out the lonely lady, and she pressed her silent, wondering boy to her bosom.

"Ione—Ione—it is all my fault!" said Carroll, in a voice as full of agony as was her own.

"No, no, Edward! But do not stay here—for his sake do not stay here. He has kept his word nobly—now keep yours!"

"I will, Ione. I will, if my heart breaks!" he murmured. "Do not fear hereafter, for as hitherto a watch

shall be kept for your protection, and closer now than ever? Retire and fear not—the ruffian Champe will soon be beyond the power of doing evil deeds. His day of doom is close at hand! Farewell—farewell!”

She looked as if she would not have him go, but she waved her white hand and said:

“Noblest, truest, most misunderstood of all men on earth, farewell, and Heaven bless you!”

Tears were in her eyes and his, and thus they parted.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A THOUSAND DOLLARS STAKED.

“Do you think he saw us?” Maggie asked, in her boy disguise, as Wrestling Joe hurried away from the house described in our last chapter.

“Girl Maggie, I don’t know. Come quick, and follow him—his eyes have a crazy fire!” replied Pepito.

And the two ran on along the streets not lighted yet with lamps, but made visible by the lights glaring from many a window, trying to keep him in sight.

They succeeded, for he went as fast as he could walk to the great Plaza, and entered one of the immense gambling palaces there, a place like the Casino, only on a grander scale.

They entered but a little way behind him; he wandered on from point to point apparently wrapped in thought, for his eyes were cast down, and he seemed not to heed what went on around him.

An hour, yes, two at least had passed, and still Wrestling Joe was wandering here and there in the great room, closely watched by at least two pairs of loving eyes, which would not tire till he had returned safely to his quarters.

Then two men came into the place—two men with hats drawn slouching over their faces, and with cloaks wrapped close about them.

Maggie was the first to see these men, and she touched Pepito on the arm.

“Champe and his friend!” the dwarf hissed out. “They mean mischief, but our eyes will never leave them. Girl Maggie, keep close to me!”

She obeyed, and so well disguised that no one would think her other than a half-grown boy, she followed Pepito, who managed to get into the rear of Champe and the other, as they moved up toward the bar.

“Wrestling Joe is here,” they heard Champe say to his companion. “We must fix him to-night, and then the other must be settled. We can never get the woman while they live.”

“Leave that to me. I’ll fix a quarrel on him by and by. Then a knife-thrust or a shot, and we are done with him. I’ll to the Jew, and get a new disguise, for he’ll know me as I am now. Stay here and watch him, so he does not get away. I’ll be back inside of thirty minutes.”

Pepito and Maggie had caught every word.

The girl took a pencil and memorandum-book from her pocket and wrote a few lines.

“What are you doing, girl Maggie?” asked Pepito.

“I am writing a warning to Joe to put him on his guard against this man, so that he will avoid the quarrel they will try to put upon him,” said Maggie. “After it is written I will pay some one to hand it to him, for we can serve him best, I know, by still remaining out of his sight.”

“Girl Maggie, you are right. Finish your note, and I will see that Wrestler Joe gets it.”

Joe seemed at last to tire of the place, and the face of Maggie brightened as she saw him look toward the door.

“He will go before that bad man returns,” she whispered to herself, for Pepito had gone to get her note placed in his hands.

At that instant a girl, one of the dancers, handed Joe the note which Maggie had written in a disguised hand.

A strange smile flitted over the wrestler’s face as he read it. Excitement was the very thing he wanted. He folded up the note, thrust it in his pocket, and glanced with a cold and haughty look around the room, as if he would measure every man within it.

His eye fell on Champe, and in spite of his slouched hat and muffled form he knew him. The huge form of the

latter shook and he turned away from the fiery look the athlete threw upon him.

The next second a stranger entered the room—a man about the size of Joe and full as muscular. His face was very dark, and he wore the dress of a Mexican. But his eyes were a light gray—fierce and vindictive in look.

Maggie whispered to Pepito:

“That is the man in a new disguise. Now we must watch closely. The life of our friend is in danger, and we must save him.”

“We will, or die with him,” said the dwarf. “Keep close to me, girl Maggie, keep close to me.”

The eye of Wrestling Joe fell on the bold, lawless, defiant face of the stranger the moment he walked forward. He seemed intuitively to feel that this was the person of whom his stranger correspondent had warned him. He saw a glance exchanged between Champe and this man, and then he knew it was he.

Therefore he was not surprised when the man came carelessly along, and speaking in fair Spanish, but not purely, asked him to drink.

“Talk English! Your Spanish talk is not half so good as your Spanish dress,” said Joe, half contemptuously.

“I can do something better than talking,” said the other, angrily.

“Yes; you can try to force a quarrel on me, and then use that long knife in your sash; but I am on my guard. I know you and him who sets you on.”

“You dare not wrestle with me for a thousand dollars.”

“Yes, but I have not the amount here to stake.”

“I have, and twice as much to back you with,” said a stranger, in a low, deep-toned voice, stepping up.

“I do not know you, sir—nor do you know me,” said Joe, modestly. “I do not wish a stranger to back me where an accident might cause him to lose his money.”

“No matter. Let the risk be mine. My name is Brown, and here is cash enough to back this handsome bit of anatomy,” said this stranger, speaking to the man who had challenged Joe.

“My friend will put up a thousand—I’ll wrestle for that and no more,” said the man, turning and pointing to Champe.

The latter stepped eagerly forward, and soon the money was up and put in the hands of the proprietor of the place, a New Yorker, named Johnny Austin.

“Give the stakeholder your weapons till the bout is over, gentlemen,” said the man who gave his name as Brown.

“I’ll hold your knife, Blinks,” said Champe, quickly.

The man Brown started as he heard the name, for he evidently recognized it.

“He will give his knife to the stakeholder, as I do mine,” said Joe, firmly. “I know well the game you’d like to play, Hank Champe, but you cannot do it here to-night. I am on my guard.”

“We’ll see,” muttered Champe, but he did not insist on taking the knife, which was handed with that of Joe, as well as his revolver to Mr. Austin.

“A single fall, or the best in three?” asked the stakeholder, who was to be umpire, too.

“I reckon one such fall as I will give him will shake all wrestle out of him,” said the stranger.

“One let it be, then,” said Joe, smiling, “since he intends it shall be terrible.”

The crowd now stood breathless, no new bets were made, all waited to see the “clinch.”

Standing side by side each man passed his arm about the waist of his antagonist, then clasping their left hands together they stood for an instant as if one waited for the other to begin the struggle.

“Play,” cried the umpire.

“Down him; curse him, down him, cap!” growled Champe, in a gruff, impatient tone.

The muscles of the arms of the stranger hardened into great knots, and he pressed the waist of Joe as if he would cursh it in, while he bent forward as he did so to draw the other off his balance.

Joe allowed his lithe body to yield, and though his own arms both grew rigid as iron there was a smile of confidence in his face, as the other bowed him forward until both seemed out of poise. Then, quick as thought, the

stranger attempted to knock Joe's feet from under him with a harsh, furious kick.

This was what Joe had waited for, his feet were moved so quick the stranger did not touch them, but he lost his own balance, and Joe, with a strength which seemed super-human, bent backward, raised his bulky form clear off the ground, and with a writhing twist cast it entirely from him to the floor with a force which shook it for yards around.

"The stakes are yours and fairly won," cried Austin, and from the crowd arose a shout which made the air tremble from the roof-tree down.

The stranger rose, his gray eyes blazing with his wrath.

"'Twas foul—he threw me foul," he cried, while a hundred shouted, "Shame! 'twas fair! 'twas fair!"

"Let him try again," said Joe, quietly.

"Look out—look out! he has a knife!" screamed Maggie, in her natural voice.

"So have I, girl, for now I know you!" shouted Champe, who was close beside her, and his huge blade flashed above her head. But quicker even yet than he was the great hickory cane in the hands of Brown, for it came upon the gambler's arm so suddenly that the knife fell to the floor.

At the instant Maggie cried out her warning the defeated wrestler, who had obtained a knife, no one knew how, bounded full at Joe, and nothing but the quickness of the latter saved him from the deadly thrust.

He moved aside as the fierce thrust was made, and the man, losing his balance, fell, driving the blade deep into the floor. The next second the dwarf was astride his neck, hissing into his ear.

"Coward! move one inch and I'll drive my dagger through your neck."

There was but a moment of confusion.

The man Brown moved close to Champe, whom he had disarmed, spoke a few short, sharp words in his ear, and the gambler turning white, slunk out of the crowd like a whipped cur.

Then approaching Pepito, who still sat astride of the fallen wrestler and would-be assassin, the man Brown said, in a friendly tone:

"My little friend, if you'll let that braggart up he'll follow his friend Champe who has gone to roost. Do it as a favor to me."

Pepito rose, but seeing the stranger's knife in the floor he broke the blade short off, then turning said to him:

"The next time you offer harm to Wrestler Joe I'll take your heart!"

The stranger rose and as he did so the man Brown made a sudden movement with his hand, and off came the dark wig from the stranger which most disguised him, revealing his own light curling hair.

"When the Pirate Blinks wishes to try his hand at wrestling," said Brown as he did this, "he had best let Wrestling Joe alone."

"I'll mark you whoever you may be," said Blinks, but he hurried from the spot.

There were too many inquiring looks upon him now. He did not care to be known even in a crowd like that for what he was.

Brown now turned to bid the umpire give all the stakes to Joe. But the latter, the dwarf, and Maggie, all were gone.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE VILLAINS IN COUNCIL.

The shop or office of Abraham Manteufel was indeed a dingy, poverty-stricken looking place, and he a fitting representative of just such a shop as far as looks went. Though a small room in the front of a large shed-like building, walled in with thick adobe brick, this shop seemed to be the only inhabited part of the building.

This was not the case. In the rear there were large rooms where those able and willing to pay for the same could be furnished with choice wines, or even stronger drinks, by a shriveled up old woman, whom Abram called mother, though he looked full as old as she.

Into one of these large back rooms, admitted through a signal, known only to the few who were allowed to come

there, Henry Champe hurried when he left the gambling palace in the Plaza.

He was alone. He did not wait for his defeated friend.

"Holy Fader Abrahams! Why comes you here dish time of night when honest peoples is asped?" was the salutation of the Jew as Champe came in.

"Get me some brandy, and ask no questions!" said Champe, roughly. "Blinks will be here pretty soon."

"Yesh, yesh! You and him hunt togedder when you can. Have you lost all your monish?"

"No—but a thousand gone, and all his fault. Get the drink; I'll pay your price, old usurer."

"Well—well, I'll get it to pe sure. Why don't you wait for him, if so he'll come."

"There is his whistle—go let him in, and get the drink if you want pay for it."

"Well, well—I'm going. Pe like Chob, my goot frent, pe like Chob and have your batience."

The old Jew shuffled off after giving this advice.

Blinks came in a minute afterward. His eyes glared with a dangerous light. He looked at the gambler a moment, and it seemed as if he intended to attack him.

"Champe—you're a mean, cussed coward," he hissed between his set teeth.

Champe made no reply. He did not like to egg the tiger on by a single word.

"Armed as you were you let that blasted dwarf ride me down before all that crowd, with a dagger over my neck."

Still Champe made no reply.

Blinks grew furious because the gambler made no excuse.

"Dog! when I fight your battles again may I be roasted worse than ever you were."

"You lost no money—the thousand up was mine!" said Champe at last.

"A million curses on the money! What do I care for that? It was defeat from such a pigmy; and then to miss a blow which would have ended him, and after all to have that devil-bug of a dwarf astride my neck! What were you doing? That is what I would like to know. I surely saw you draw your knife out."

"Yes, and had you not fallen when you did you would have seen my arm beat down by a blow which almost broke it."

"A blow! From whom did it come? Joe was standing over me."

"And Edward Carroll, disguised, but known too well to me, was standing over me. Had it not been for him Tennessee Mag would have been in another world to-night with the dwarf to wait on her. That man is ever in my way; he is my curse—will be my doom! Oh, how the time flies on! The fourteenth day of March will soon be here, and then—then will come the end. The brandy, Manteufel—the brandy, you old wretch, or I'll throttle you!"

The Jew, who had returned, got the bottle ordered, and again disappeared.

"You, say Carroll was there to-night? I did not see him," said Blinks.

"You saw, but did not know him. I did not until he struck down my arm and spoke to me in his own tone of voice. It was he who put up the money for Wrestling Joe—the man who said his name was Brown."

"What, that burly stranger? You must be mistaken."

"No—too well I knew his voice and his angry eye when he bade me leave. Do you think I would quail before another man as I did then?"

"No; I hardly think you would. And believing as you do that he bears a charmed life I don't know as I should blame you so much after all. Drink till your blood warms, and then let us plan out work. I am on the war-path in this matter now, and I'll see you through. Even if I have to land my crew we'll have that woman. As to the two men and that accursed dwarf, they shall swing from the yard-arms of my brig! That is sworn to!"

"Good; and when that is done, if you'll lay the brig up in some snug cove, and take your men inland with me, I'll take you to the haunts of the brigand Joaquin, and we'll get his treasure and the enormous reward his head will bring. I have got men of my own in his gang on purpose to betray him when we are ready, and have men enough to do the work."

"You are a full-fledged villain, Champe."

"Thank you, Captain Blinks. We are a pair."

"Knives, Champe; knives of clubs at that. Ha, ha!" said Blinks, laughing. "And so you have got matters planned to rope in the great Joaquin?" he continued.

"Yes, all cut and dried."

"Hush—don't talk about dat Joaquin—dat creat robber as is worse dan was Barrabas!" said the old Jew, coming forward again.

"What is the matter with you—you look as if you had seen a ghost!" said Blinks.

"No, no—I've seen no ghost. But I hear you talk of Joaquin, de robber dat scares all men about de land. Dree nights I tream of dat man. Dree nights I say, and it makes me tremble when I hear you speak his name."

"Bah! old coward. You're too poor to rob, you know. Why should you be afraid of Joaquin? Are not we here?"

"Ay, and able to handle twenty Joaquins were they here to face us."

"Fader Abraham—oh, what is dat?" cried the Jew. "I hear some one laugh a hollow laugh. I know I did."

"It was the wind, or some one coughing in the street. Go to bed, old man; go to bed, and leave us to our talk!"

"Well, well I goes, but don't speak about dat Joaquin. It will make me tream anodder tream."

"Fool—Joaquin would never dare come here. I'd give my brig and all the plunder in her to have him stand before me. There's half a million in rewards now offered for his head."

"Fader Abraham—heard you not dat?"

And the Jew shook from head to foot. For not only he, but the others, heard a laugh so hollow and so strange that the blood seemed to chill in their veins.

"Twas in the street," gasped Champe.

"Yes, and no one could hear us there. I don't like it—it sounded ghost-like!" said Blinks, filling up his glass, and draining it instantly. "Fill up, Champe; fill up and let us go out and see who is on the street."

"Not for a world," said Champe; "not for a world, good Blinks—not now at least. I'm all unnerved."

"At a name—we both are cowards," said Blinks, as he drank again. "I am ashamed of myself. It is bad enough to shrink from what we can see and feel. To stand in awe of sounds, and tremble at a dream, is worse than dastardly. I will not yield to it again."

"Nor I," said Champe. "If Manteufel keeps ghosts here to scare his customers we'll make a ghost of him. As to robbers, I don't think they'd trouble him. Where did you store my diamond solitaire, my emeralds and pearls, old hunks?"

"Don't talk so loud, good Mishter Champe—don't. If Joaquin should hear you."

"I wish he did, and stood before me now, you trembling fool."

"Oh, don't say dat, Mishter Champe—he is der duyvel some mens say, and he will come if but you call him."

"If I thought so I'd call," said Blinks, who was now well primed with fiery drink.

"And I would echo your call, brave Captain Blinks," said Champe, with a swaggering laugh.

Again that wild, hollow laugh rung through the room, then there was a crash, and looking up the men saw a portion of the wall slide apart as if the house was opening at the side.

With mouths agape, trembling, their faces white with fear, Blinks, Champe, and the Jew stood and saw the wall part as if by magic, the panels sliding right and left.

And in the gap thus made stood a group of men, with cocked pistols in their hands, ready to deal instant death.

In front of all a man whom Champe remembered but too well—the dreaded Joaquin himself.

The gambler in his terror gasped out the name:

"Joaquin!"

"Ay, it is Joaquin, whom you have reason to remember," said the bandit, stepping forward.

At a sign his men formed a circle around the three, who now knew themselves prisoners, if nothing more.

"Great Master Joaquin, spare poor old Manteufel!" whimpered the Jew, dropping on his knees. "My years are almost gone, and I am very poor."

"Be silent, Jew—I will look to your poverty ere long. First, I have a little business here."

He pointed to Blinks, and then addressed him:

"You are a robber! Your home is on the waters. Why do you invade my empire on the land? I will allow no rival on the shore."

"I came here but for a change of scene. My men are all on board—no single act of crime as men call it have they done on shore in California."

"Speak you all the truth?"

"Not all. I had some heavy chests of plates which I wanted to exchange for money, or to have melted down. I knew this poor Jew would help me in the matter."

There was a wicked sneer on the pirate's face when he said "poor Jew."

"I think you speak the truth. When I am done here you shall go free on board your vessel. But do not cross my path on shore again. Now, dog, to you."

And Joaquin turned fiercely upon Champe, whose knees knocked together in fear as those eyes turned hot upon him.

"You have been boasting. You said you knew all my haunts. Had maps of every trail of mine. That you would lead that man and his gang of sea-robbers to those haunts and win the rewards that are offered for my head and for the destruction of my band."

"I lied, good Joaquin—upon my soul I lied. It was but an idle boast."

"Lied? You never spoke the truth but when it suited you, and you are lying now."

"Upon my honor, sir."

"Your honor! Satan has a better right to boast of piety than you to speak of honor. A miserable cheating thief—a gambler whose life is all a cheat, a lie! I but waste time in talking to you. Did not your life belong to another I would crush you now beneath my heel as I would grind a worm to death. Where are the maps of which you boasted. Produce them, or I will teach you tortures which will make death a mercy."

Trembling, the gambler drew out a package of papers, with routes of rivers, mountain trails, and localities marked plainly by a hand which seemed well conversant with such work.

A bitter smile lighted up the bandit's face as he coolly examined every one.

"They are but wretched sketches," he said at last.

"And would mislead almost as much as lead. But he who drew them has been in most of the spots he has tried to mark out—not all. The traitor has earned his reward. What was it to be?"

Champe did not answer.

"What were you to pay Andreas Carrabajal and his brother for this treachery?" thundered Joaquin.

Even as he spoke two of his own men dropped upon their knees, for they, the traitors, were in the room.

"To get their pardon and give one-tenth of all I got," said Champe, who saw now that all subterfuge was useless.

"I think in this you speak the truth. They are not Californians, nor Mexicans, nor even Spaniards. They are mongrels, mixed with half a dozen breeds."

"We are but men—he told us millions should be our share, and we go free to other lands to enjoy it," said the elder of the two Carrabajals.

"You shall go free," said Joaquin, quietly.

They knew well that when so very calm he was most dangerous.

"I am about to accord to each a privilege. Jew, fill up two glasses with drink from that bottle. These faithful followers, these friends of mine, must drink my health."

The Jew, with difficulty, filled the glasses, for he trembled fearfully.

Joaquin took from a pocket a vial with a liquid in it, amber colored. He poured but a single drop in each glass.

"Drink!" he said, sternly, as he faced the kneeling men.

"Drink!" They rose, they did not pause or hesitate. No man who knew him ever did. They were armed, and might have tried to sell their lives in one fierce struggle. But they did not lay a hand upon a weapon.

"We deserve it, captain," said the elder of the two, and he drained his glass.

"Santa Maria, pray for me!" the other murmured, and he drank.

Then for an instant they stood, erect, waiting for a change which they knew must come. And soon—but a minute—a bluish pallor came like a shadow—or a foggy light might speak it better—over both faces, then a gasping spasm.

"Fire—fire is in every vein," gasped the elder. "I cannot bear it."

And now he laid his hand upon his dagger—his aim to end the agony at once.

"Forbear! Let the poison do the work," said Joaquin, with a changeless tone and face.

The hand dropped from the dagger-hilt, and a moan of agony broke from the lips of the wretched man.

His brother, who had seemed to draw in all his breath, stood quivering for a second more—then fell forward rigid on his face without a sigh.

The elder saw him fall, drew a long, gasping breath; his limbs seemed to contract or yield to his weight, and then he, too, fell beside the other.

"It is over," said Joaquin. "A hard lesson, gentle men," turning to his men, "but one most necessary. Now, Jew, your keys. I will investigate your poverty."

"Oh, Mishter Joaquin, spare poor old Abram the little he has got. I am so poor—so poor."

"Your keys, you whimpering wretch—your keys!"

And Joaquin cast upon the Jew a look so terrible that he drew a huge bunch of keys from beneath his ragged jacket and handed them to Joaquin.

The latter tossed them to a man who had not opened his lips all this time, but who stood close by his side watching every motion of those who were in the room.

"Pacheco, you, with three others, will ransack every chest and drawer, and bring the plunder here. Make haste—we have but three hours more of darkness now."

"Good Captain Joaquin, I have deposits in the chests of this poor Jew. I hope you will not take them."

"And I have a diamond, a solitaire, a dozen emeralds, and a string of pearls!" said Champe, eagerly.

"Which are all confiscated, since I find them here on land," said Joaquin, quietly. "Not a word, gentlemen—not a word; when I speak I never change."

"But are not we professional?" said Blinks, trying to act as if he felt at ease.

"That alone saves your life," said Joaquin. "Sit down and do not vex me. I am not in a mood for annoyance just at present. The treason of those poor fools sits ill upon me."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"JOAQUIN, THE MURDERER."

San Francisco was literally wild with excitement—or the people were, I mean.

The rooms of the Jew broker or money-lender were found wide open in the morning, his iron chests all empty, his own body lying at the threshold, with a dagger buried to the hilt in it.

The old woman, whom he called "mother" sat beside it, a jibbering maniac, muttering only the name most terrible all over California—

"Joaquin! Joaquin!"

Upon the floor inside, with their arms yet belted on, lay two men, with no sign of violence upon them, except a white froth, which, oozing from their mouths, seemed frozen there.

Upon the breast of each of these a paper lay, and in red letters were these words:

"He who is false to Joaquin will surely die!"

These men, by looks and dress, had evidently belonged to the Bandit Band, but how or why they perished was a mystery which even the papers on their breasts did not explain to the satisfaction of those who read them.

The Vigilance Committee held a special session. Additional rewards were offered for the head of Joaquin. The town was placarded from end to end.

"We'll have full houses now!" said Johnny Austin to a friend. "For no one will walk the streets at night now."

"I don't see but what they'd be as safe there as in their houses," was his friend's reply. "Joaquin is everywhere, it seems. He must have Satan's aid."

"I'm half inclined to think that he is not human, but Old Nick himself roaming the earth just for a change!" said Austin.

As Johnny Austin had predicted, his place was literally crowded that night. The report that Joaquin and his band had been in town, and perhaps even then were lurking in or around it, caused the people to gather where they knew the greatest crowd would be assembled, as if in congregated numbers they would find safety.

The full band was in its station. Every barkeeper at his post, the gaming tables all attended, and what might be termed "a lively time" was in full blast.

Of course, with such a crowd, there were many strange faces, but some were the old "stand-bys"—men who were there rain or shine, no matter what was going on.

The man who had backed Joe, the Wrestler, the night before was there—Mr. Brown, as he called himself—and as he had shown a handsome pile the night before he was much importuned by the ropers-in and cappers of the games to try his fortune.

But in a good-humored way he evaded the many plans to get at his money-bags, though several times he threw an ounce upon the bar and told the crowd to "drink it up" to his health.

He seemed all the time to be expecting some one there, and passing from point to point he studied every face and form as if perhaps he thought the one he looked for might come in disguise.

One thing was sure. If he looked for Champe he looked in vain. If he sighed to win another thousand from Captain Blinks his sighs were useless. Wrestling Joe had not come out. He had listened to the tearful appeal of Maggie and had remained at his rooms, where she with patient skill was spangling some portion of a gorgeous costume, which he was to wear upon the stage.

And Pepito, happy in the sunshine of their eyes, was chatting with them both and watching girl Maggie's finger's fitting to and fro with the rapid needle.

Mr. Brown walked here and there, now answering some jests made by a laughing girl, then avoiding the lee-lurch of a man full "half seas over," but he stopped when a tall, red-faced, brutal looking man entered the place, bringing an arm full of printed proclamations, which he scattered among the crowd.

The man was the appointed sheriff of the Vigilance Committee, and the papers scattered now contained an offer of ten times its solid weight in gold for the head of "Joaquin, the Murderer."

"How much, think you, such a head would weigh?" asked Mr. Brown of the official.

"If it was a shock head like yours, more furze than substance, 'twouldn't weigh much," said the sheriff, tartly.

"If it be thick as yours it might weigh a good deal without amounting to much," replied Mr. Brown, loud enough to draw attention to his words, and raise a laugh at the expense of the other.

"Look here, stranger, I don't know you, but if your looks don't belie you, you've worn striped cloth before you came out here. Look out we don't swing you one of these odd days."

"I don't wear the cloth of 'Cherry Hill,' or ever feel the stripes of Natchez under the Hill," said Mr. Brown, in a tone of sarcasm.

The sheriff turned more colors than a dying dolphin could show, and dropped his eyes. Mr. Brown evidently knew him.

"You'd better button your lip, McGowan!" said a man who had heard his taunt and the reply made by Brown. "There is more than one that knows you here, you see!"

The sheriff passed on to a pillar that supported a corner of a balcony, in which the ballad singers stood when they came out to sing, and here tacked up one of the proclamations.

As he did so a Californian, who had drank more wine apparently than was good for him, tore it down.

"What did you do that for?" cried the sheriff, angrily.

"Joaquin is a better man than any interloping Yankee here!" said the man, reeling up against the post. "I knew him when he was as kind a gentleman as ever bowed before the altar. 'Twas you Yankees made him bad."

"You lying dog, I believe you are one of his band. I'll arrest you on suspicion, at any rate," cried the sheriff, and he clutched the speaker rudely by the shoulder.

"Let him alone," said Brown; "don't you see he is in liquor."

"By all that's good and bad I'll take you both!" cried the sheriff. "Vigilantes! Vigilantes! to my side!"

There was a rush of a dozen or more men upon the Californian and Brown, when the former drew a whistle from inside his vest, and blew a loud, shrill call.

It was answered from outside the house, and the next second to the door, and plunging in among the crowd, who yelled with wild affright, there came a horseman at full speed.

A horseman—his red sash literally lined with pistols all around his body; two revolvers, one in each hand extended; a rifle at his back—dashing forward on a steed which seemed all as fearless as himself, for it plunged crushing on, trampling down all who could not avoid its terrible track.

"Joaquin!—'tis Joaquin himself!" came from a hundred lips. "'Tis Joaquin!" came in a shriek of terror on every side.

"Ay, it is Joaquin!" thundered the terrible rider, as he wheeled his horse at the far end of the room. "It is the man whom ye would hunt as we would hunt the tiger or the grizzly bear—the man upon whose head ye've placed a price! Cowards! My hands are red with the blood of a thousand lives! My graves dot every hill and valley in the land! Your women make their crying children still with the terror of my name. I am Joaquin, and I defy you all. Where is the Vigilante who will lay his hand upon my arm?—where?—where the ten, the twenty, who will arrest Joaquin Muriata?"

He wheeled his horse and backed him against a wall, and glared with his great wild eyes upon a crowd hushed into silence.

The daring of the man, the terror of his name, the belief of many that he was indeed a fiend in human shape—all seemed to cast a supernatural awe, a deathly chill upon the crowd, and not a hand was raised, or weapon drawn; not a word was uttered.

"Let me and mine go forth, free, unscathed, without a lifted arm, or ere the day dawn comes your town shall be ashes!"

This was all he said, and no bugle ever rung more loud and clear than the voice which uttered it.

And every man—the doughty sheriff as much as any—seemed to feel that it were more than death to stand before that man; and while he slowly walked his horse through the space made open as he rode on no one offered to interfere, and no one spoke until he was gone.

Then the sheriff looked for Brown, and for the Californian who had blown the call, but both were missing.

Not till now was the silence broken, but, immediate danger past, there were fifty to cry, "Pursue, and shoot him down!" "Why did you let him escape?" and many another cry, of no value but to expend the speaker's breath.

A murmur, an uproar of loud talk, in which was many a word of admiration for the outlaw's daring—this now followed fast, until the room, vast as it was, seemed a very Babel for its noise.

There was no use to try to "run the place" in its usual way now. Games were forgotten. The dance was not thought of. The women were afraid to come upon the floor. All that was done for the rest of the night was to talk—to talk of what Joaquin had done here and there, to conjecture what he would do yet, or to threaten what should be done if he ventured on so bold an act again.

Every one blamed his neighbor that he had not tried to take the man, or shoot him down, and wondered what could so have palsied every arm. And thus the night passed away, the bar making much, the gaming tables nothing.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WRESTLING JOE'S ENGAGEMENT.

Wrestling Joe did not so wonder, as the many did, when he heard of the last daring act of Joaquin. He had learned more of the nature of that man in the brief time when he had seen him watching by the side of his dear, dead wife, bending to take his last sad kiss, and kneeling

over her unsodded grave to make a vow he knew so well that he would keep, not to understand him.

Joe was reading to Maggie and Pepito an extra newspaper, got out with all the colors of exaggeration needed for the time and people of the new, adventurous land, telling the events of the previous evening.

"Mr. Carroll was there!" said Maggie. "For he is the one they name as Brown—the successful backer in the wrestling match the paper says."

"Yes, and they couldn't arrest him, or the friends of the brave Joaquin, it seems!" added Pepito. "He is brave, so brave, and best of all, he is true to his friends. Does the paper say what has become of him?"

"When Joaquin rode away, and the crowd had recovered their senses somewhat, search was made for the man named Brown, and the Californian, who had torn the placard down, but neither could be found. They had disappeared while the excitement was afloat."

"Thus reads the paper," continued Joe. "And now that he has shown himself a friend to Joaquin so openly, Brown, or Carroll as we know him, will no longer dare to linger here. Hark! that was a knock at our door!"

"Yes; shall I open?" asked Pepito.

"Of course. It is broad daylight, and no one can venture to do a deed of rudeness at this hour."

"None but such as Joaquin, and he is our friend!" said the dwarf, and he went to shove back the bolts and see who wished to enter.

A cry of pleasure broke from his lips as the door flew open, for he knew that Joe would like to see the two who stood there. They had both been kind to Joe in his dark hours at the mines. Gilroy and Bellows were the visitors.

Joe received them warmly, while poor Maggie, shrinking in her nature, fell back to a distant corner, and bent to her needlework.

"Why have you left the mines?" asked Joe, when his friends were seated.

"Because my business is dead up there," said Gilroy. "When night comes on there is no more play or fun as there used to be. The miners group together in cabins that are fortified, and armed, wait for the coming of Joaquin or light. The terror which that man has thrown all over the country cannot be imagined by any who do not know it from observation. Travel has almost ceased—work is only carried on by armed parties strong in number and fearless in character—every trail is dangerous."

"I am glad you are here, and safe," said Joe. "I am about to appear in the new theater, in classic tableaux, and in scenes arranged purposely for me."

"We've seen the bills," said Fred, "and from the manager learned where to find you. But will not this visit of Joaquin here affect people as it has up in the mines—keep them in at night?"

"I think not—there are too many people here. They will not believe he'll come again," said Joe.

"La Belle Oreana is billed also for a farewell week," said Gilroy. "I wish the engagement was mine. With all that interfered I cleared fifty thousand dollars by her engagement with me. It looks fabulous, but it is true."

"I do not doubt it. Your place was thronged, and at the bar you trebled every entrance fee."

"Trebled—yes, far more than that. But it is all over—the bar is closed."

"And Othello's occupation's gone, thank the gods!" said Fred, with an air so like a favorite actor that Joe had to smile. "Hast anything in the larder, friend? A pasty, or the haunch of an antlered stag? We did not wait upon the order of our coming, but we came, nor waited at the tardy banquet board as laggards would. Speak—Horatio, speak—or we will vanish like thy father's ghost, and for a square meal go out upon the Rialto, or to some sequestered glen, where pork and beans at a dollar for the plate may greet our vision."

"Maggie, my little housekeeper, will soon have a square meal set out," said Joe. "And while she prepares the table I'll show you the stage dresses she has made for me."

"Why, can this rosy-cheeked, this bright-eyed girl, be she—the hapless Mag of Tennessee!" said Fred. Then, in an instant, as he saw a look of pain cross her face, he added, "I beg your pardon, Maggie; I did not wish to

bring up a painful thought: but you look so well, so lady-like, so happy, I did not know you."

"I am happy; he is so good and kind to me," said Maggie, a soft smile lighting up her face. "I am his sister, and I owe more than life to him. He is so good to let me live near him and work for him."

"He is one, who, take him all in all, is a brick—a gem of purest ray serene—a rose which by any other name than Joe would never smell one half so sweet to me."

"Come, see my dresses now, for Maggie will soon call us to the table," said Joe.

This inspection drew Fred into another line, and as it lasted some time Maggie had leisure to prove what a treasure she was in the way of housekeeping.

When at last Fred and Gilroy sat down at the well-laden table, saw the white cloth, the spotless crockery, and tasted the well-cooked food, and the delicious coffee, they were more than ever surprised. Not in all their stay in California had they seen an approach to such a meal, or seen neater rooms than these; and the work was done by a "waif," recovered from destruction's crowded sea.

CHAPTER XXX.

JOAQUIN IN DISGUISE.

Edward Carroll, well disguised as he was, found a great many eyes regarding him after Joaquin and his open adherent had left the saloon, and apprehensive of arrest or troublesome inquiries in times when law was not much regarded, nor life and liberty anywhere safe, he determined to leave for his quarters, to change his costume. So, while the excitement was at its height he slipped away, and when the sheriff had time to think of him he was not to be found.

When he left the door of the great saloon a hand touched his arm, and a low voice in a friendly tone said:

"Don Eduardo, you have made enemies to-night who are dangerous. A friend would give you aid and advice. Will you follow me?"

"Whither?" asked Carroll, not knowing but a trap was laid.

"Not far, but where safety to your person is insured, and where you will meet one who never deserts a friend or forgets an enemy."

"It must be Joaquin himself. I will go," said Carroll.

Following his guide, who was wrapped in the serape peculiar to California, and whose features were hidden by a slouched hat low drawn over his face, Carroll passed through several narrow streets, and then halted at the door of a cabin built in the side of one of the great sandy hills back of the town.

Here the guide gave a low whistle, repeated it thrice, then touched the door with the hilt of a knife or dagger, with a low knock.

A voice inside asked, in Spanish:

"*Que hora es?* What time is it?"

"*La hora para comida,*" was the singular reply. "The time to eat," we literally render it.

The door flew open, and Carroll followed his guide into a dark room, hearing the door closed and barred through which they had just passed.

A whispered colloquy passed between the guide and the one who guarded the door; then they passed on and the second door opened, admitting them to a large, well-lighted room, in which at least fifty armed men were grouped in various postures—some lying down, others eating, and others yet smoking the short cigarettes liked so much by people of their class.

Joaquin was there, and at once stepped forward to welcome his visitor.

"I knew you would come, Don Eduardo, and therefore left a faithful man who knew you to act as guide. You were marked by many a hostile eye to-night, and if you would preserve life and liberty must either leave this town, or else wear a disguise which even friends will fail to penetrate. If Don Eduardo will remain with Joaquin, he will be protected. I will so disguise him that he can watch those whom he loves and whom he hates, and while he protects one he shall foil and punish the others!"

"Thanks, generous chief—thanks, and with them take

my acceptance of your offer! For a time at least I will avail myself of your aid."

"Then rest here content. I must shortly leave here on a tour of observation, but shall soon return unless that happens which sooner or later must befall us all. My men will regard you as a welcome guest, and obey your wishes as they would my commands."

"Again I thank you," said Carroll, warmly.

"We will now enter an interior room kept for my own use, and where you will lodge while here," said Joaquin. "I must there make a change in my appearance, for I have a meeting to attend which may or may not be important to me."

Leading the way to a small room back of the main apartment Joaquin bade Carroll make himself at home. There was food and drink in abundance, a comfortable bed and even books lay scattered on a table with which his time might be passed.

Joaquin now made a rapid change in his personal appearance.

"I will now leave you, Don Eduardo," said the bandit. "I have much to learn and more to do before I leave the city, for I am even safer here than out on the plains. There they are hunting for me night and day, impelled by the blood-money offered for my life. No one will dream I dare to linger where so many people live who have seen me."

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THEIR TRACK.

By special arrangement, Mr. Bonycastle, the manager of the theater in San Francisco, had taken Mr. Gilroy into partnership with him.

The papers, as well as flaming posters, prepared the people for a splendid "opening night" under the new management. The great singer and beautiful woman, La Belle Oreana, who had literally driven the miners frantic with delight in the interior, was to open with a new repertoire of choice music, supported by the finest orchestra on the Pacific coast.

Two great athletes, Wrestling Joe, the champion of the world, and Fred Bellows, the Apollo of Olympian games, were to appear not only in various classic groupings, but in a piece especially prepared for them, called the "Wrestlers of Corinth."

These were additional attractions to the usual comedy by the stock company, and forced the management to put a premium on the choice seats.

It is needless to say that the opening night was a success, financially speaking, for Bonycastle and Gilroy. Not even standing room could be found when the curtain rung up. And the scene before the curtain was full as much a study, as any that could come from behind it. For all nations, all classes and conditions were represented in front. Every hue and garb was there mixed in, the one as various as the other.

In a private box, well screened by curtains, retained by the management, there were two deeply interested persons who had seats there through the influence of Wrestling Joe.

We need scarcely say that these were the girl Maggie and Pepito, the Mexican dwarf, since both lived with and were under Joe's special protection.

From the moment she entered the box, Maggie through an opening in the curtain had been scanning faces in the audience. Pepito seemed content in looking only at her. For now that she was kindly treated and knew a quiet contentment to which she had before been a stranger, Maggie had grown really handsome, and the poor dwarf, hideous himself, seemed to enjoy the study of her beauty, as we often enjoy the view of that which we may not hope to possess.

Suddenly the dwarf saw her eyes flash, and an eager expression light up her face.

"What does girl-Maggie see!" he asked.

"Our enemies. The enemies of Mr. Carroll, of Wrestling Joe, of La Belle Oreana, of us all," she whispered.

"One must be Bully Hank—whoever the others are," said the dwarf. "Where are they?"

"Hush? You whisper loud. They are here close to the front. Look."

The dwarf looked out and scanned face after face.

"I see them not," he said, shaking his bushy head.

"Girl Maggie must be mistaken."

"No—no—the eyes of hate, which burn in the head of Henry Champe, will never be forgotten by me. Look almost within reaching distance of our box. You will see two men, whose heads are close together, and who are often whispering.

"Why they are pig tailed Chinamen!" said the dwarf, "with blue caps and frocks. Brown as chocolate—girl Maggie cannot mean them."

"Watch their eyes when La Belle Oreana comes out to sing," was Maggie's low reply.

An instant later the singer, recalled, appeared, and then the dwarf realized that Maggie was right. For even in their well-chosen disguise the gambler Champe and the pirate Blinks could not hide the expression of their eager eyes and sensual faces, and the dwarf wondered he had not, like Maggie, sooner recognized them.

"They are studying mischief," said the dwarf; "mischief to her."

"Yes, and to Wrestling Joe as well. The flashing of their eyes when he came out was the first thing which drew my attention. But we know them, and now we must watch and guard our friends."

"We will, and may the good saints help us," said the dwarf. "But look—girl Maggie—look, they are watched by some one else than me. Do you see that sailor with brown hair, but jet black eyes, just on their right? He has kept his eyes on them, and only them, for some time. His eyes have a cold, deadly glare, and it seems as if I had seen those eyes before."

"They are not the eyes of Don Eduardo?"

"No—his are not so dark, or cold. That man hates Bully Champe or his friend, and will watch them all as closely as we can do. Oh, how the people cheer!"

"Yes, they are wild when she sings. And she is beautiful? I do not wonder that Wrestling Joe loves her. Why she does not love him is a mystery to me."

"Perhaps she does, girl Maggie—perhaps she does."

"No, or she would sometimes see him, sometimes permit him to see her. Even at rehearsal, I heard him say to Fred Bellows, she avoids meeting him. There is a strange mystery in it all. Don Eduardo Carroll knows her, loves her, yet she will hold no interview with him."

"What has become of him? Have you seen him here to-night?"

"No. I heard Joe say that he was in the great saloon when Joaquin was there. No one has seen him since. Gilroy and Bellows both were asking after him."

"Yet he cannot be far away, when Bully Hank is here. He hates Bully Hank, and has sworn to kill him. But he will wait until the fourteenth day of March arrives."

"Hush! We were overheard. See Hank Champe tremble. Now, am I sure, had I not been all convinced before."

Maggie watched the disguised gambler, who was glancing right and left, with evident trepidation.

He had heard those words—"the fourteenth day of March"—but whence they came he could not tell.

Nervously he whispered to his companion, evidently urging him to rise and leave the place. The latter dissembled impatiently, for it would be almost impossible to force their way out of the dense crowd between them and the door.

Maggie and the dwarf now watched him all the more closely, scanning every look, both in his face and that of his companion, reading hate, sensuality, and mischief in each glance.

Maggie determined to give Champe one more terror before the evening passed away. To do it, she waited until the performance was through, then as the two pretended Chinamen stood with their backs near the box, she spoke in a low, sepulchral tone, her voice completely altered:

"Beware! the fourteenth day of March is close at hand."

Champe sprang as if he had been bitten by a serpent.

"Did you hear that, Blinks? Did you hear that?" he gasped.

"Yes; but words can't kill. Be a man. Keep still, or we may attract attention."

And the pirate passed on, followed by his trembling companion.

"Quick, Pepito; quickly leave by the back door and get to the front of the theater before they go out. Then watch where they go. They mean mischief to those whom we love, and their every action must be watched."

"I will go," said Pepito. "But look, that sailor is moving close behind them. He is on their track, and he is their enemy."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MESSAGE TO LA BELLE OREANA.

Pepito, the dwarf, emerging from a door in the rear of the theater, hurried to the front in time to observe the two villains, who were disguised as Chinamen, make their exit with the crowd. Wrapped in a dark mantle, and so diminutive that he would only be taken for a child, if noticed at all, he struggled on through the crowd, close at their heels, until he saw them enter a large building, devoted, like many others, to the various purposes of an eating, drinking, and gambling-house.

He followed into this, close upon their heels, and saw them pass on through the crowd already inside, until they reached the lower end of the room, where, near the bar, on one corner, there was a table partially hidden by a screen.

At this the two men took a seat, and Blinks, in broken English, imitating an educated Chinaman admirably, called for whisky.

Pepito planted himself against the screen, within a few inches of where Champe sat, ready to catch every word which should fall from the lips of either of the men—for it must be a low whisper which would not reach his ear through the thin painted muslin of the screen that hid his form from them.

The two villains talked for some time, when suddenly Blinks exclaimed:

"Hush! Do you see who is at the door?"

"Why, the two managers, with Wrestling Joe and Fred Bellows. If we could fix the drink they're about to swallow, the theater would hardly open to-morrow night."

"We can do as well. Keep quiet, and, when they leave, we will follow. The night is dark, we both carry knives, and know how to use them. Four quick blows in the back, and that much would be done."

Pepito breathed hard. He had heard every word, and yet had not moved from the spot. But now he turned to see if the two managers, with Joe and Fred, were really at the bar.

As he did so, tired with standing long in one position, he staggered against the screen and partially pushed it over against Champe.

The gambler, ever suspicious, sprang to his feet, and, glancing around the screen, saw the face of Pepito, before the dwarf could turn to hide it, if, indeed, he wished to do so.

"Devil! You've been listening," he hissed, and he reached out his hand to grasp the little man.

"Yes; Pepito heard all, Bully Hank. Big coward, why you not try to kill Pepito and Wrestler Joe now, eh?"

And springing back, the dwarf threw off his mantle and showed that a long, keen dagger was glittering in his hand.

A revolver was out from under the blue frock in a second, and poor Pepito seemed doomed, as its barrel pointed down at him, but a bounding leap from Wrestling Joe placed him beside the dwarf, and the pistol was stricken from the gambler's hand at the instant of its discharge, sending the ball harmless into the floor.

And, ere a word could be spoken, or a breath breathed, Joe planted a fearful blow in the face of the supposed Chinaman, which staggered him back on Blinks, who was rushing to his side.

"Away, Hank! We're double-banked—away with me, and wait for chances!" cried the pirate, and, drawing Champe with him through a rear door, Blinks was in an instant out in the darkness.

"What in thunder are you quarreling with Chinamen for, Pepito?" asked Joe, who had been too much excited at the danger of his *protege* to notice either the looks or

the words of the man who had pointed the pistol at his head.

"Chinaman a heap," said Pepito, indignantly. "Pepito would think your fist would know Bully Hank's head, for it has felt it before."

"Hank Champe? Were not those Chinamen who just rushed out of the back door?"

"Ask girl Maggie, when you go home, what we both saw at the theater, and how she scared a Chinaman by saying fourteenth of March soon come. Pepito followed them Chinamen here from theater, heard 'em plan how they was to kill Carroll, Wrestler Joe, Gilroy, and Bel-lows, Pepito, too, and then take girl Maggie and La Belle Oreana all for themselves. Then they saw Wrestler Joe and his party come in and say hush. Pepito turned to look, he tripped against screen and you know the rest."

"Well, Pepito, you are a true friend and a noble little man. We all owe you a debt of gratitude. But we will be on our guard against this fiend Champe and his associates. The two were well disguised, I must confess. Mr. Gilroy, will you do me a favor?"

"You know that I will do anything in my power, sir, for you."

"Go to La Belle Oreana, give her this small revolver, and tell her that the wretch Champe is still in pursuit of her. I know she will defend her honor, even as her life."

"I will go with your present and message, though I know she is already armed, for I saw a case of pistols on her table when she sang for me before."

"Tell her this revolver has been carefully loaded by my hand—it will not miss—and tell her that I shall watch for her safety, even though I may not live myself to see her once more safe in her distant home."

"I will bear the message at once."

"Then I will go home with Fred and Pepito, for Maggie will be painfully anxious till we come," said Joe.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FOILED.

When La Belle Oreana arrived in San Francisco, she secured the services of Bridget Maloney as a servant and companion. Bridget was with her wherever she went.

On this opening night, La Belle Oreana was detained some time in changing her dress, and when she left the theater there were but few people passing along the street, for almost all who had not sought their homes had dropped into the gambling dens or drinking places.

The lady, wrapped in her mantle closely, moved swiftly on, with Bridget by her side.

Suddenly, on turning a corner, they were met by two Chinamen, who were hurrying in an opposite direction, one of whom ran full against the stout form of Bridget, nearly upsetting her.

"Out o' that, ye onmannerly havthen!" cried Bridget, and she brought the man a slap under the ear from the flat of her hand, which must have made him see stars. "Can't you travel widout runnin' over a Christian, ye omadhoun?"

"Curse her, she hits hard!" said the man, staggering back, while his companion, catching a glimpse of the lady's face, exclaimed:

"We're in luck, cap, we're in luck. It is La Belle Oreana. Aboard the goes, now or never."

In a second the lady recognized that voice—she knew that Hank Champe was before her; and as he threw his strong, brutal arms about her lithe and slender form, a scream of terror from her lips broke the stillness of the night.

At the same instant Champe strove to stop her cries by thrusting her cloak, wet with the slow-falling rain, into her mouth.

"Keep the other woman off, cap!" he shouted, as he strove to dash along with Oreana.

But Captain Blinks had received a second well-planted blow from Bridget, which sent him into the middle of the street; and now the brave Irishwoman sprang upon the miscreant who held her struggling mistress in his arms, and who had succeeded in stifling her cries.

Grasping the plaited tail of hair, she tried to jerk the Chinaman over, but, to her horror and terror, off came

tail, hair, and all, and the heathen pressed on at a speed which would in an instant have left her out of sight, had not a man dressed as a sailor sprang before the fleeing wretch.

"Halt, unmanly dog, and let that helpless woman go," cried the sailor, sternly; and he clutched Champe by the arm, wheeling him fairly about.

This gave Bridget the chance to reach him, and the next second her nails were clawing into the bare face of Mr. Champe so furiously that, to save himself, he dropped his intended victim, and turned upon the woman who was tearing into him like a mad tigress.

He turned with a knife in his hand, but it was snatched from his hand by the sailor, who threw it far away in the darkness, as he said:

"Devil, it is hard to spare you, but the fourteenth of March comes soon. Begone!"

With a shriek of terror Champe fled away, Blinks following fast, while the stranger, turning to the lady, said in a low, kind tone:

"Madam, you are now safe. Proceed toward your lodgings, for friendly eyes will keep watch till you get there."

At the door of her lodgings the lady met Mr. Gilroy, who brought the weapons and the message from Wrestling Joe.

The lady turned pale, when she took the weapon in her hands.

"Had this been with me a few minutes ago," she said, "a human life would have been sacrificed. Tell him I have been in peril, but my brave Bridget and a stranger foiled the villain who assaulted me. Henceforth I will be prepared."

She then invited Mr. Gilroy to enter, and told him the particulars of her recent adventure.

"That man, Champe, must go under," he said. "He is not fit to live. But I do not think he will dare attempt to molest you again. If he crosses my path, I will shoot him down like a dog."

"Your honor will know him by the token I left wid my finger-nails, on the face of him," said Bridget. "Shure, an' he's as purty as a pig wid the masles I'm thinkin', wid a scald or two of hot water thrown in."

Gilroy laughed heartily at Bridget's droll idea, and left.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TO PLAY FOR BIG STAKES.

And where was Joaquin all this time? We must go back to see.

In his disguise as a miner, with the red dirt on his rough mining clothes as if he had just come from the upper claims, he sauntered into the great saloon of Johnny Austin.

A shaggy brown wig and a rough yellow beard nearly covering his face, mated his costume well, and the slouched hat came so far over his brow that his greatest peculiarity, fierce flashing eyes, were too much shaded to be very noticeable.

Sauntering in as if he was looking for a place to pass time in, more than for any specialty, he stopped first before one table and then before another, looking at, but not venturing into, any of the games.

At last he paused before a faro-table, where a very heavy game was going on, for several prominent sporting men were "bucking" against the bank. This was safer at Johnny's than anywhere else, for it was known that he would have a square game or none at all.

Here Joaquin paused, and, after watching the run of the cards for a few moments, he pulled out a great canvas bag from under his rough red shirt, and taking from it a large roll of Mexican doubloons, counted off twenty and laid them on a single card—the ace—which had already lost once.

The dealer seeing the game made, began to pull the cards, and in a moment the ace won. The doubloons were doubled, of course.

Joaquin did not lift the stakes, but let them remain when the dealer again began to draw, and soon the ace came out against the bank once more.

The dealer and banker glanced at Joaquin now, for the

man who had eighty doubloons laying in one pile, was worth a glance.

With his arms folded over his broad chest, the supposed miner stood and waited for the game to go on.

"Thunder!" said a man by his side, an old player. "You'll not risk the last ace in the deal on a pile as big as that, stranger?"

"I will, and shall win," said Joaquin, in a firm, confident tone.

The deal went on, and Joaquin did win, having now over twenty-five hundred dollars in hand from an investment of three hundred and twenty.

Joaquin did not bet again until a fresh deal was called. Then, as before, he laid not merely the sum he had already won, but that and one hundred ounces, as he told the banker, in good dust, on the ace again. The dust was weighed and found right, before a card was drawn, and then there was a moment of breathless interest. For even in that day of utter recklessness, men were seldom seen to lay down gold in such a careless way as this miner did.

The dealer cried out: "The game is made," and commenced to draw. Nearly half the cards were out, some winning and some losing, for the bank or against it, before the ace, on which so great a stake depended, was seen.

When it came, the banker and dealer at once cried out: "Our game stops. The bank can't stand that man's luck." For Joaquin had won again.

"Cowards. Had I your pile I'd fight fortune all night," said Joaquin, in a contemptuous tone. "I'll run the bank, if you are afraid to face my luck."

"Let him have the bank," cried three or four at once, for they, as old gamblers, had no belief that as banker he could win, whose luck had run against the bank.

"He can't have the bank," said Johnny Austin, coming forward himself; "but if he wants to buck on his luck, he may go higher than he has yet. There is no back down where I play, while there is an ounce in my hand or in the hands of my friends."

"I'll not play against you," said Joaquin, and he turned his back to walk away.

Austin almost held his breath when that voice fell on his ear. He had recognized it. He knew it in an instant, and that the man was the terrible Joaquin.

When the miner walked away, with his gold once more secured about his person, he quietly followed him and watching his chance when they were separated from others, he said, in a low tone:

"Others might recognize you, who will not do as I do—give you a friendly warning and advise you to leave a crowd, so large as this, with your lucky winnings."

There was no start, not a sign of alarm in Joaquin, as he replied:

"I knew what you were so well, that I did not try to change my voice when I spoke to you, as I could have done. Joaquin holds his life in his hands, and has no fear of death. He is looking for some enemies that were among those who first drove him into crime, or he would not be here. Fear not that any act of his, or those whom he commands shall injure you, or one beneath your roof—but look—there comes a devil whom I must watch. An hour ago, I balked him in one game—I will balk him in another yet. Keep your own counsel, and see me teach him something."

"You mean Hank Champe, who is there by the door?"

"Yes."

"Well, do what you like with him. There is not a meaner cuss on the coast than him to-day. But he holds a high head, and has influence with them who do not know and despise him as I do. But be careful, for if you are recognized you are lost."

"Fear not for me, brave man. I have faced death in a hundred shapes, and when it comes, indeed, I shall smile contentedly and meet it. Now watch—I will get him into a game."

The bandit staggered on toward where Champe was standing, and in a thick voice as if he had been drinking, said:

"I've got more pluck than any other here in all the crowd—broke the bank and backed 'em all down. I'm king pin of the party."

"In luck, eh, stranger?" said Champe, against whom he staggered.

"Yes—the biggest kind. Beg pardon for running agin ye, but I've swallowed too much pison, I guess."

"No matter—can you play seven-up?"

"Me—me play seven-up? I'd like to see the man that can beat me at it for a thousand ounces."

"I have no such pile to put up. But I've got the biggest diamonds in the place and a small pile of coin. I'll go the whole on the best three out of five games."

"Good! I'm in—but what do you put your diamond up at?"

"Well, say fifty thousand dollars; but you'll not win. I'm high on old sledge."

"We'll see. Let's have a private room. I don't like to play with a crowd at my elbow."

"You can have my private chamber for an hour, gentlemen," said Austin, "and I'll see the game played, though this mining gentleman is a stranger to me."

"Blinks, you'll come with me, will you not?" said Champe, turning to a very good-looking man, with fine form and heavy, black whiskers, dressed in fashionable style, who stood near.

"Of course I will. I like to see big games played," said the other.

The four now adjourned to a room in the rear of the main saloon, which Austin kept for his own private use, and as a lodging-room.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"THAT MAN IS MINE!"

According to agreement, Gilroy after visiting La Belle Oreana, to give her the message and the pistol sent by Wrestling Joe, went to the lodgings occupied by the latter to report.

Joe, who was engaged in a rehearsal scene with Fred Bellows, was so anxious to hear from her that he at once suspended business, and waited to hear Gilroy's statement.

When he heard of the recent peril of the lady, and that the villain Champe had attempted a fresh outrage, his anger knew no bounds.

"That dog must go under," he said, bitterly. "He has been spared too long. I will hunt him up and slay him before I sleep. He was disguised as a Chinaman. No matter what is his disguise I shall know him, for the eyes of hate like mine can pierce all disguises."

"He will not trouble her again to-night at least," said Gilroy. "It is not likely, if you go out, that you will meet him."

"Yes. He is such an inveterate gambler that he will be in some game or other wherever he is. Come, Fred, come—we will find him."

"Where first?" asked Fred.

"To Johnny Austin's, that is the biggest place in town. If he isn't there we'll go to Yankee Sullivan's, and keep on till we do find him."

The two friends were soon inside of the great saloon, passing on among the people with their glances wandering over every form.

Table after table was passed until the entire room was gone over, and there was no sign of Champe.

"Not here. We will go to Sullivan's, and keep on till we do find him," said Joe, in a tone of disappointment.

"Why have you not asked if he had been seen here?" said Fred.

"I know no one here to ask. You know I'm not acquainted with the men he herds with. Ah—that voice—I heard his curse, I know I did."

"Yes—yes—and there goes a pistol shot—it is in the rear of the saloon," cried Fred.

"Joaquin, Joaquin! look out for him!" yelled a man at the top of his voice, as he rushed into the saloon from an inner door.

It was Captain Blinks who spoke, and the blood streaming from his face told that he was wounded.

"Joaquin, Joaquin! take him—take him!" cried Champe himself, rushing in at the same door, and his face was white with terror. "He is in there—he is in there."

"And you are where I want you," cried Joe, not heeding the excitement on every side, as he rushed toward Champe with a gleaming knife upraised in his hand.

The gambler had turned to point at the open door-way which he had just rushed through, as Joe with this cry, rushed upon him, and there seemed no chance for him to avoid the vengeance now hovering dark above him.

The raised hand of Wrestling Joe, with the keen, terrible knife in it, was falling swift as the lightning's lurid flash, and the life of Henry Champe was not worth a second's insurance, when a hand came even more swiftly down upon the wrist of the furious athlete, and the knife was not only turned from its aim, but shaken from his grasp.

"That man is mine, and he must live until the fourteenth day of March," said a stern voice, and as Joe tore himself loose from the grasp upon his wrist Champe turned to see that now his life had been saved by Edward Carroll.

"Curses on your head, how dare you interfere with him whom I have sworn to slay!" cried Joe, wild with rage, and he drew a revolver from his belt.

"Fire on me and account to her for what you have done," said Carroll, calmly, and he stood firm before the upraised weapon of the wrestler.

"Heaven! I cannot kill you!" groaned Joe, and he turned to look for Champe again.

The cowardly ruffian had fled, and with him went the pirate, now his constant companion.

But where was Joaquin, whose name was on every lip? Was he indeed in the room from which Champe and Blinks had rushed, shouting his name? If so he had not harmed Johnny Austin, for that gentleman now came out from his private chamber with an unruffled countenance, smoking a cigar as peaceably as if he was all alone in the world.

"Where is Joaquin? Where is the bandit?" asked a hundred eager voices, as Johnny stepped from his chamber.

"The gentleman who sought to play a fair game with Hank the Bully, and caught the latter cheating, has stepped out by the rear door. He lifted the stakes, when he found Hank trying to rob him, and Hank thought he'd get him in a scrape by calling him Joaquin. That was a humbug, for the gentleman was playing out here for an hour before he went in there, and there are plenty here who have seen Joaquin, and who would recognize him in an instant if he was really to come among us."

"That is so!" said the sheriff, who had hurried forward on hearing the report that the bandit was in the house. "But why did the gentleman you allude to leave, and by the back way, too?"

"Because when he lifted the stakes Hank and his friend grabbed for him. He put a ball through the cheek of the friend and told Hank he'd put one through him if the day had come. Hank ran for help, and shouted out the name he did, and I advised the stranger to go."

"You're sure that it was not Joaquin?"

"Am I a fool? Would I let slip a chance to make fully a hundred thousand dollars in reward?" said Austin, scornfully.

That was a sufficient answer, for the crowd turned back to their games again, while Austin himself invited the sheriff to "imbibe."

"Hold on," said the official. "If Joaquin is not here—one of his band is. This is Mr. Brown, who escaped me when I tried to arrest him and another of the party when we all know Joaquin was here."

And he pointed to Edward Carroll, who met his gaze, with a look of cold and haughty contempt.

"You'll go with me, sir," continued the sheriff.

"Scarcely, sir, without a writ of arrest," said Carroll, still smiling. "I know this is rather a lawless country. But I am an American citizen, know my rights, and mean to maintain them."

"We'll see, sir!" cried the sheriff, angrily. "I'm in duty bound to arrest any suspicious person, and I shall arrest you."

"For what?"

"That is my business. So come along."

"I will not. And you lay a hand on me at your peril!"

The sheriff glanced around him. He saw plenty of men whom he well knew would back him. He saw only that one, blue-eyed, pale-faced, brown-haired stranger—armed, it is true, but only that one to oppose him.

"Again I say surrender and come with me!" thundered the sheriff.

"Again I refuse!" replied Carroll, in a low, firm tone, and he laid his hand upon the butt of his revolver.

"Sheriff, I'll go bail for that man!" cried Austin. "I've seen him before, and I'm sure he is all right. Now, let him go, and we'll both go before the Alcade in the morning."

"He'll go with me now," said the sheriff.

"Not without he chooses. I hate him as I hate no other man on earth, but I will vouch for this that he is an honest man," cried Wrestling Joe.

"The noblest work of God, as Shakespeare wrote one thousand years or less ago," cried Fred Bellows, ranging up by the side of Joe, who had stepped near to Carroll.

"If it must come to resistance here is where I also stand," said Austin, and he moved to Carroll's side.

The sheriff looked annoyed. He knew too well what Johnny Austin was to care to force a rupture with him. Always quiet and smiling, there was not in all the town a man so utterly fearless, so thoroughly desperate as he.

"Gentlemen, all, I thank you for your proffered aid. Now that this officious officer sees that I have the power to resist, and friends who failing to bail, would aid me in that resistance, I will go with him of my own accord. For on examination I can show as clean a record as any man upon this coast."

These words were followed by action, for as he spoke Carroll walked deliberately up to the sheriff, and added:

"Move on, sir—I will go with you."

"You need not—you need not," said Austin. "I will be your security."

"I thank you—but I prefer to go."

"Do not—do not, for Hank Champe is on the Vigilance Committee," said Wrestling Joe, earnestly.

"Thanks for your second interference in my favor, Mr. Caruthers," said Carroll, with a cold bow. "I do not fear Mr. Champe's power in that committee. Again, Mr. Sheriff, I say that having surrendered I am ready to go with you."

The sheriff was but too glad to get his prisoner so easily, and he at once retired with him.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A PECULIAR ASSEMBLAGE.

In a large hall, with the windows close-curtained, and so dark that even before night set in it had to be lighted with lamps, fully three hundred men were seated in silence on benches, ranged lengthwise on either side of the room.

On a platform slightly higher than the rest of the floor at the upper end of the room several men were seated in chairs.

In front of them was a single chair, and on each side of it, silent and stern, two sentinels stood, with muskets at a shoulder, and fixed bayonets on the arms.

The peculiarity of this assemblage was this: Every man was armed—carrying both knife and pistols in his belt.

This was not all. The face of every man was concealed by a black mask, with holes through which gleaming eyes could be seen, and an aperture for breathing freely.

This and the complete silence made the assemblage seem more like beings of another world than of this, and it was well calculated to strike an awe upon any one not belonging there, who should come in.

"Mr. Sheriff," said a tall man, masked like the rest, "are our doors closed, and all present sworn members of the committee?"

"The doors are closed, Mr. President, and none have entered who have not given grip and countersign."

"It is time then to open. Let it so be understood. Gentlemen—we have for trial a man charged with being a member of the band of that terrible enemy of mankind, the bandit Joaquin. I would ask the prosecuting officer if his witnesses are present?"

"They are at the door, Mr. President," said a masked man near him. "I left them there just now in the care of one of our committee."

"Let them be introduced and then the sheriff will bring in the prisoner."

The prosecuting officer spoke to another person near

him, and he went out. In a few seconds he returned with another masked man, and two white men and an Indian unmasked.

"The witnesses are here. Three are strangers, the others are of our committee," said the prosecuting officer.

"It is well. For defense we will appoint as good and true a man as there is among us—one who knows neither fear nor favor, but who loves right, and will do it. Number Seventy-four will conduct the defense."

A gentleman stepped out from among the crowd, drew a chair from the platform, and took a seat beside the yet empty chair in front.

"Are we ready?" asked the president.

"We are! we are!"

This came from all over the room, every person seeming to speak.

"Mr. Sheriff, retire—release the prisoner from his irons, and bring him in."

The masked sheriff turned and left the room by a rear door. All was now breathlessly silent, for at least three or four minutes.

Then the sheriff rushed in alone.

"Mr. President, the prisoner has escaped!" he cried.

"Escaped?"

It was the voice of Champe, which first thundered out the cry, and a little oath followed the single word.

"Escaped?" cried the judge. "How is it possible? Was he not in irons, and is not every avenue guarded here night and day?"

"Yes, Mr. President, but a woman was allowed to enter. She came here weeping, saying she was his sister. She was permitted to see him in the dark room, where he was confined. She was there but a little while and came out as the guards supposed, weeping even harder than when she went in. That was natural, and no one hindered her. But it must have been our prisoner, disguised in clothes like hers, for the woman is now in the dark room, and no other person is there."

"Let her be brought here," said the president, sternly. "And let the guards all be placed under arrest."

The sheriff sent an assistant for the female, while he took men from the committee to replace the guards.

"By Jupiter, it is Mag of Tennessee!" cried Champe, completely thrown off his guard, as the brave girl, pale but firm, entered the room.

"What number spoke then?" asked the president. "Let him step forward."

"It was I—number 26!" said Champe.

The president glanced at a roll of names in his hand.

"Yes—you are a prosecuting witness, too. Do you know that female?"

"I ought to!" said the gambler, sneeringly. "She was my mistress!"

"His victim, sir, but never his mistress, for I know Henry Champe, the thief and gambler, by his voice," said Maggie, boldly.

"What you are or have been to him is nothing to us," said the president, sternly. "You have aided a prisoner to escape from us. You are liable to punishment. Were you of his sex you should swing in his place. Why did you aid him? Are you his sister?"

"No, she is not. She has no brother!" cried Champe.

"Because you murdered him in cold blood, you coward," cried Maggie, with flashing eyes.

"Number twenty-six will be silent. I will manage this case. What excuse have you, girl, for thus interfering with the course of justice?"

"I did not wish you to hang an innocent man. I learned that there was a plot in which he, whom you call number twenty-six, was engaged as principal, to get this man brought before your committee on a false charge with false witnesses, so that he might be got out of the way."

"It's a lie!" shouted Champe.

"Twenty-six will be silent, or he will leave the room!" thundered the president.

Maggie turned a grateful look upon the masked president.

"Oh, sir, if you will only let me speak—if you will but let me show all these people who and what that man—Twenty-six, or Henry Champe—is, you may punish me with death afterward!"

Her look, her earnest tone, had an effect all over the room, for there were murmurs audible to the ear from every side, and the tone of these was not angry. Her face wore no sign of evil—even the sorrow-marks had passed from it in the months of contentment she had experienced since escaping from the toils of the monster Champe. She was almost beautiful—at least, very interesting in appearance.

Champe saw that a tide of feeling was turning in her favor—he felt that it would but strengthen this if he persisted in showing his enmity, and he would do best by keeping quiet and running his chance of getting her into his power afterward if she was set free now.

So he kept quiet while the president replied to her.

"Mr. Champe is not on trial here. What he may have done to you or any one else is not before us. You have a gentle, innocent look, which evidently prepossesses nearly all who are present in your favor. But in releasing a man, or rather in aiding him to escape, before trial here, you have laid yourself liable to trial and punishment."

"But, sir, he was innocent of the charge which was made against him. He was not a robber—not a member of any wicked band."

"Then he should have remained to prove it. He would have had a fair trial here."

"Oh, no, sir. Henry Champe was ready to swear falsely to bring him to death. He had witnesses ready to perjure themselves as well. There they stand. Look at them. There are no masks on their faces. Look—look, guilt speaks in blushes on that man's cheek!"

She pointed to Blinks as she spoke.

"Anger, you she-devil—anger makes me flush up!" said the pirate.

"Silence all. We will once more ask this young girl—her name has not been given——"

"Maggie Alvord, sir!"

"We will ask Maggie Alvord, then, distinctly, what defense she has to offer for having aided a prisoner of ours to escape?"

"Only this, sir—I knew him to be a good man, whose life bad men would swear away. I could not bear to think he should perish when I might save him. If I have done wrong it is not my heart that tells me so."

"What shall be done, gentlemen, in this case?" asked the president. "We are ready to hear suggestions."

"I move that she remains confined in this place until he is arrested, for he cannot escape," said Champe.

"Number Twenty-six has personal feeling in this matter, and his motion will not be listened to. If another member had made it the chair would entertain it, and with a seconding put it to vote."

The motion was not made. If Champe had friends there none were bold enough to back him in his enmity to the young girl.

The president smiled.

"Has our prosecuting officer nothing to say?" he continued.

"Only this—true men do not war on women! This girl has acted bravely if in error, and we should respect bravery where it is not connected with intentional crime."

A burst of applause followed this declaration, and poor Maggie knew that the danger which menaced her had passed away.

"Go, Maggie Alvord," said the president. "You are free. But never again run such a risk as you have run this night. I appoint Number Seventy-six, a chivalrous gentleman, to escort you safely to your home. The witnesses need not be retired."

"Who'll give me blanket for make big lie, as pale-face there promise," said the Indian, pointing to Champe, whose voice had made him recognizable.

There was an evident commotion all over the room, dangerous to Champe, but the president gave it no chance to germinate—he cried out:

"Remove those witnesses, and we will proceed to the trial of the guards for permitting a prisoner to pass—or, in other words, for palpable neglect of duty."

"I've been here long enough," muttered Champe, and he turned to leave with the witnesses.

"Twenty-six will remain!" said the president, sternly. "There has been too much personal feeling shown on his

part to allow him to leave here until that young girl has been escorted safely to her home. He will hereafter be more prudent, or he may find inquiries instituted into his general character, which will not be agreeable."

Champe sat down, though every nerve quivered with hate and anger. He had not the power there that he had supposed he had, and there was an evident feeling against him not only in the mind of the president, but in the minds of many of the members.

Had that poor girl been permitted to tell all her sad story Henry Champe might have found his way of exit from that room by the plank that jutted from the second-story window, and on the rope that dangled overhead.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

STRICKEN SENSELESS.

There was more haste than ceremony in the manner in which Captain Blinks and the Indian were conducted out of the rooms of the Vigilance Committee.

As soon as they were outside they were left to go where they pleased.

"This is a pretty piece of infernal nonsense," said Blinks, angrily, as he paused to decide where to bend his steps. "Which way are you bound, Fish Eagle?"

"Me wait and make pale-face give me blanket all same like I make big lie for him!" said the Indian.

"Well—here goes for Kangaroo Harbor and some grog and grub!" said Blinks.

The pirate passed on, and the Indian was about to go in another direction, when, Maggie exchanging a glance of intelligence with him, passed in company with her escort.

The next instant a woman approached the Indian, and said, in a low tone:

"Pl'ase, Mr. Injin, my mistress bade me ask you if Mr. Carroll was in or out of throuble yit. She can't go to the thayater nor anywhere else for thinkin' of it."

"Your mistress, La Belle Oreana?"

The Indian spoke low but plainly.

"Howly saints, he talks like a Christian!" said the astonished woman. "Yes. Sure, Mr. Injin—she's my mistress, and better niver broke the bread o' life."

"Tell her Don Eduardo Carroll is safe, and that the truth and faithfulness of a woman saved him," said the Indian.

"A woman? It's not meself that is afther thinkin' she'll like to hear that, sure. One woman don't like to have another doin' that, that she'd like to do herself. But I'll take the word to her. Good-by, Mr. Injin. Ye're not handsome sure, but ye're not half so bad as I had ye in my mind."

Bridget hurried off to tell her mistress the little she knew, and the Indian again turned to go. But the voice of Champe reached his ear, and turning in the lamp-light which shone in front of the door he saw him come out, his face black with rage long constrained.

"Where's Blinks!" he asked, rushing up to the Indian.

"Pale-face gone to wigwam to drink fire-water!" said the Indian.

"And the girl—which way did she go?"

"So!"

The Indian pointed out the direction in which Bridget had just gone.

"That way—how long since?"

"Not three breaths. What pale-face calls one minute!"

"And alone?"

"Yes—man tell her to go, she safe now!"

"Good! I'll show her how safe she is!" cried Champe, with a hateful laugh, and he rushed away up the street.

The Indian followed swiftly, for he knew there would be fun if Champe overtook Bridget Maloney.

And he did. Before the good-hearted Irishwoman had gone three hundred yards up the poorly lighted street Champe was close behind her.

"I've got you now, you she-devil!" he cried, as he threw his arms about her waist. "Utter a loud cry—one scream for help, and I'll cut your throat from ear to ear."

"Hands off, ye black thafe o' the world!" cried Bridget, tearing herself away from his sudden grasp. "Hands off from a dacent woman, or I'll scratch yer two eyes into one."

"Thunder! it is not Mag!" cried the astounded gambler, springing back.

"No, I'm none of yer Mags nor your hags either, ye ould scalawag! So be off wid ye, and take that for a memory!"

Bridget slapped his cheek with the flat of her hand so suddenly, and so heavily, even as she spoke, that he staggered off for a yard or two and nearly fell.

"Woman or no woman, I'll have blood for that!" he cried, and he drew his knife as quick as he spoke.

He had neither time nor chance to use it. It was stricken from his hand by some one from behind, while a stunning blow under his ear, from the butt of a pistol, laid him senseless on the ground.

"Howly saints—it's the Injin!" said Bridget, in surprise.

"Yes—go home! You are safe now!" said the Indian.

"Faith, it's me that'll be after thankin' you, Mr. Injin, for what you've done, but I'd be safe from the likes o' him, barrin' his knives and pistols, ony time o' day or night either. Sure I could wallop him as I would a donkey wid my flat hands. But 'twas kind of you, Mr. Injin, and I'll tell my mistress how you did it, sure!"

"Well—go home. Keep a good watch for her. While this man lives she is in danger. I would like to kill him, but his life belongs to another. The fourteenth of March is not far away."

A groan told that the words had been overheard by the gambler, who was coming back to consciousness. Bridget moved on and the Indian left also in another direction, not recognized by Champe.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FREE.

"Saved, and by a woman's faithfulness!"

This was the ejaculation which burst from the lips of La Belle Oreana when Bridget brought her the message sent by him who was disguised as an Indian.

"Yes, ma'am, them were the very words."

"What woman?" asked Oreana, almost fiercely. "What woman has interest in him to save his life, and how did she do it?"

"Faith, ma'am, I don't know a word more than I've tould you!"

"You were not in the prison?"

"No, ma'am, only foreninst it!"

"Did you see any woman?"

"Yes, ma'am, while I stood a waitin' to see the Injun or some one else, to tell me what you bade me find out, a purty girl, a young one wid a pale face and eyes that looked like they'd been swimmin' in tears, went by me."

"Who was with her? Was it Eduardo Carroll? Speak quick."

"Sure, ma'am, I didn't know who 'twas. I don't know Mr. Carroll that you're sp'akin' about."

"True—true—was it a blue-eyed man whom you saw with her?"

"No, ma'am, his eyes were black and bright, and his hair, too, and curly almost as a nager's. He was as tall as a gate-post, and as thin as a shadow."

"It was not he," said Oreana, and she breathed more freely. "But I must learn the particulars. If he has so acted as to free me—if he has, then once more can I turn to—ah, what now?"

Her words had been interrupted by a boy who stood before her with a note in his hand.

"From Mr. Gilroy," said the lad, "and he bade me hurry, ma'am."

"Oh, yes—yes, in my agony I had forgotten the theater. I will be there in a few minutes. Hasten, Bridget, my dresses are in the basket. Run, my lad, and tell him I am on the way."

The boy hurried off, and La Belle Oreana throwing on her hood and cloak, took Indice by the hand, and while Bridget took her wardrobe for the evening the lady placed the revolver in her bosom which she had received the night before.

"He is free—he is free! Oh, that he would now go where peril will not hover around him all the time," she murmured as she went on.

When Oreana reached the theater she found the managers tremulous, for the audience had become much

excited because she did not appear at the time marked on the programme.

All was right, however, when she did come.

As soon as she retired to her dressing-room, after her first song, she sent for Mr. Gilroy.

"I know, madam, what you would ask," he said, as soon as he saw her earnest, inquiring look, "and I am happy to say that Mr. Carroll is free from the hands of those who wished to take his life."

"Yes, sir, I know that. But how—how did he get free?"

"I do not know precisely. I have no doubt Mr. Caruthers can tell you if you will permit me to send him to you."

"No—no, sir; I cannot, and will not, hold any communication with him."

"Why, ma'am, he is the most gentlemanly man—"

"I know it, Mr. Gilroy. I know him better than you or any one else can, but I cannot, will not, see him. But find out these particulars, please—how my—how Mr. Carroll, I mean, escaped. I heard that a woman helped him!"

"Very likely. I know one who is just good enough and brave enough to risk her life for—ah, what is the matter, ma'am. You are ill."

"No—no—a spasm, that is all! Who is this woman who loves Edward Carroll?"

"Loves Edward Carroll? Why, excuse me, ma'am, I didn't say any woman loved Edward Carroll. I couldn't say so, for I didn't know it. If this girl, or woman, loves any one it isn't him, it is Mr. Caruthers, with whom she lives."

"So—Mr. Caruthers has a—a female living with him?" said the lady, growing more calm.

"Well, yes—she keeps house for him and his friend Bellows and the little dwarf. She is a poor girl whom he rescued from that villainous gambler Champe. But as to love, or anything wrong, I know there is nothing."

"Very well, sir. It is nothing to me. You will oblige me if you will not mention our conversation to any one. I will not make a fool of myself again, or permit myself to become excited without a cause. I am glad to hear that Mr. Carroll is safe—and—and that Mr. Caruthers is comfortably situated."

The theater, well filled in the early part of the evening, became crowded at a later hour. Many of the members of the Vigilance Committee, which had adjourned, came in, and at a late hour Champe and Blinks, excited with drink, entered, and forced their way to a standing position not far from the stage.

Wrestling Joe and Fred Bellows were on the stage at the time, and both saw and recognized the gambler. Indeed they could hear his muttered comments on their looks and on their acting—comments far from complimentary. But words from a drunken man are seldom noticed, and with only a "hush" of remonstrance from some one near him Champe had his way.

Now, with a change of scene, La Belle Oreana came on for the last song of the evening. As she reached the front of the stage, while deafening applause made the theater tremble from base to dome, her eye met the basilisk glance of the gambler. She turned white and trembled. Perhaps she remembered when her child was held at the verge of the precipice—she turned very pale and trembled.

"She sees and knows me," muttered Champe, turning with a triumphant look to Blinks. "I'll throw color into her white cheeks when I have her in my power as I will within a week."

"One week and March fourteenth will dawn!" said a low, deep voice close, very close to him.

The gambler sprang back as if he had been bitten by a serpent, and with terror in his eyes glared on every side. Not a form or face could he recognize. Rough men, miners mostly, who had come in late, were in the crowd who stood there.

It might be a mistake. He thought he had imagined he heard the words, and again he looked toward the singer, who, as the applause was lessening, seemed ready to commence.

Suddenly her eyes gleamed with a strange light, she saw some one or something to interest her in that crowd. The gambler caught the glance—he followed its direction, and then—close to him he saw a pair of gleaming blue eyes so fixed upon her face that they seemed to see nothing else.

Oh, how his black heart leaped! For he recognized now, in spite of all disguise, the form of him whom he hated more, and dreaded more, than any other man on earth—than all his enemies combined.

Yes, Edward Carroll was there, almost within reach of his arm. And but a little way beyond he saw the fierce, vindictive face of the Indian.

Champe saw all of this at a glance, and half drunk as he was he became sobered in a moment. What should he do? His first impulse was to shout out Carroll's name, and have him at once arrested. But with bitterness he thought of the manner in which he had been treated by the Vigilance Committee, and he would not aid them now.

Oreana began her song. Her voice was low and faltering. Evidently she was becoming ill or faint again. Then rallying she sung loud and clear once more, until closing her song the thunder of applause was deafening.

And those blue eyes never left her face all this time. In a wrapt expression of devotion, as the enthusiast gazes on the picture of a saint, that look was bent like a soul's utterance on her face and form.

All this Champe saw with eyes apparently averted, and his heart gloated over the thought:

"I will kill him and possess her!"

The curtain fell, and the audience began to leave the theater.

Bidding Blinks and the half-dozen men with him to go and wait for him at Kangaroo Harbor Champe devoted himself to following Carroll. Managing to catch the eye of the Indian he beckoned him to his side.

"I have work for Fish Eagle!" he whispered. "Work which shall make him rich."

"More big lie?" asked the Indian, with a dubious shake of his head.

"No—work with your knife. Follow me, and do not leave me!"

"I shall stay close by pale-face," said the Indian, and he took good care to keep within an arm's length of the gambler. For now he saw that Carroll had been seen and recognized by his enemy. The Indian only wondered that he did not try to cause his open arrest. There was some deep meaning in the way he acted. To find it out would be easiest by being ready to appear anxious to work for him.

So the Indian moved on close beside Champe.

"Keep close to me; do not separate," he said to the Indian, in a low tone, and passed on.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN PERIL.

"What's the matter wid you, swate mistress? Is it sick you are?" cried Bridget Maloney, when they reached their lodgings after the theater was closed. "Your eyes look wild, like the say wid storm-flashes on it, and your cheeks are all aflame wid redness."

"I'm sick at heart, Bridget; sick of man's perfidy."

"Sure, ma'am, I don't know what ye call perfidy, but the men are all born divils! I'm sure of that! Will you have some tay, ma'am, before you go to bed?"

"No, no! Undress Indice and get him to sleep as soon as you can. I am going out!"

"Out, ma'am—out at this time of night?"

"I said so, and I always mean what I say!"

"The good angels be wid us, but I belave she's goin' crazy!" said Bridget to herself, as she prepared the boy for bed, an easy task, for the little fellow could scarcely keep his eyes open.

The girl was not long in doing this, but she had to arrange his couch beside the bed of his mother. When she laid the little fellow in it, glancing lovingly down on his placid face, she murmured a prayer for Heaven to bless him, for he had been too sleepy to say his own prayer, as he almost always did.

"Sure an' isn't he a pictur' now, wid his lily-white face, only tinted wid red on the cheeks, and the bright hair framing it in. Maybe they're angels that are purtier, but it's doubtin' it I am. The mistress should be proud of him, and she is—"

"No—I shall hate him—I shall hate him!"

The words came fiercely, vindictively, strangely from

the lips of that sleeping child's mother—so strangely that Bridget sprang to her feet with a cry of alarm.

"Sure—sure, ma'am, it's mad ye are to spake so of the beautiful boy that loves you so!"

"I believe I am going mad, Bridget. But come, good girl, come. I am going out, and you must go with me."

"I, ma'am, and leave the boy all by himself?"

"Yes; no harm will come to him while we are absent. I must satisfy myself on one point. I cannot sleep if I do not. I shall go mad, indeed, if I do not learn whether my suspicions are well-founded. If they are—if they are—"

"Well, ma'am?"

"Then I will know what to do, and not until then! Come, put on a hood and cloak. See, I am armed with dagger and pistols, and if assailed this night woe be to him who lays a hand upon me. Come, girl, make haste! You must guide me!"

"Do you mane to go far, ma'am?" asked Bridget, at the door, where her mistress stood, hooded and cloaked.

An answer came, but it was not from the lips of her mistress. It was from a man, who, with a dozen more behind him, had halted just as the lady opened the door to come out.

"Farther than her own will would take her!" cried this man, as he sprang upon the lady, so suddenly that her arms could not be raised, or she have a chance to release herself from the cloak in which she was closely muffled.

"Men, gag and bind that servant, and pitch her into the house," he added, as with giant strength he lifted Oreana from the ground, and with one hand close over her mouth hushed her attempt to scream.

The men, apparently used to quick obedience, had Bridget gagged and bound in a few seconds, and throwing her on the floor inside the room, as directed, they now followed their leader, who moved on rapidly, trusting his burden to no other arms.

La Belle Oreana, terror-stricken though she was, did not lose consciousness. She was not sure, but she thought she had heard that stern, hoarse voice before somewhere. It was not the voice of Henry Champe, though. She felt sure of that. And who else would dare an outrage like this?

She tried to move her hands so as to reach the pistol in her bosom, but the man whose arms so rudely pressed her form said, in a low tone:

"Keep quiet, lady, or it will be the worse for you. Any attempt at escape will end in your death. I am not a trifier in such matters."

He was hurrying on as he spoke, and as her head was muffled in her hood she had no idea whither he was going, but she heard the sound of dashing water in a little while, and knew by this they must be near the harbor.

Then she felt the chill of the wind as it swept over the waters which she heard, and heard him who carried her ask of those following him:

"Where is the boat? Was it not left at this pier?"

"Yes, sir; but the crew may have been frightened off with it," replied a man. "There is no boat here."

"Curses on the luck! If the boat was here she'd be safe from all chances of rescue in twenty minutes. Look from pier to pier for our boat, and if she is not found take another—any one which will enable us to get off with."

"Ay, ay, sir," came from the mouths of three or four men.

And now her captor allowed Oreana to stand upon her feet.

"Breathe not a loud word, lady, or you die. Be quiet and you shall not be harmed," said the man, in a low tone, so stern that she knew he meant all he said.

"Where are you going to take me, and who are you?" she asked, as firmly as she could, but remembering his threat she spoke very low.

"I am the friend of one who loves you. I hear him coming. Yes, that is his voice. He little dreams that I have his prize in my hands."

Oreana trembled from head to foot, for she heard a voice which she knew but too well.

It was that of Henry Champe.

CHAPTER XL.

A FEARFUL ADVENTURE.

When he left the theater, Edward Carroll, dropping away from the crowd into a by-street, not knowing that he was followed, moved listlessly and dreamily along as if busied with thought and aimless as to his destination.

This suited the wretch, Champe, exactly, and as soon as he could do it without attracting notice elsewhere, he pointed out Carroll to the supposed Indian.

"Fish Eagle," said he, "the man who walks there is my deadly enemy. I have tried to kill him many times, but fortune has ever been on his side, and I have failed. Now, I want you to kill him."

"Pale-face make a heap talk—Fish Eagle understand a little. Pale-face want that man killed?"

"Yes—speak low, or he will hear us. Kill him, and I will give you a rifle and a horse."

"Good! He walks toward the big water. Fish Eagle put knife in his back, and throw him in. But, no! Pale-faces will hang me."

"No one will know you did the deed."

"You will. You want to look on."

"No—I do not care to be a witness. Do the job alone and be quick about it. I have a friend to meet at a pier just below here. I'll run down there while you do the work."

"Good! In three breaths he sleep last sleep in the big water. Fish Eagle has a strong arm and a sharp knife."

"Use them, use them!" said Champe, hoarsely, as he turned away.

The Indian sped on, and Champe, who had paused, heard a sharp, sudden cry, as of agony, then there was a splash in the water.

He looked back. The Indian was standing alone near the end of a pier.

"It is done. It is done, and I'm free," cried Champe, and he laughed wildly, as he hurried down to meet those whom he had engaged to see. "Ned Carroll is dead—the spell is broken. Ha, ha!"

He saw a group of persons at the end of the pier toward which he hurried, and recognizing by their garb that they were seamen, had no doubt of their character.

"I've no need to go on board now," he cried, as he rushed on to meet them. "Ned Carroll is out of the way now. I've sent him on the road that has no turn-back—ah, that scream! a woman there?"

"Ay—La Belle Oreana—are we not in luck?" shouted her captor.

There was a blinding flash in the speaker's face, a sharp report, and he staggered back, releasing his hold upon the hapless, desperate lady, just as Champe rushed to the spot.

In a second, while one of the seamen caught and sustained the form of the falling man, others caught and disarmed her.

"Are you slain, Blinks, are you slain?" cried Champe, as he grasped the arm of the pirate.

"No—no—it is but a graze. She fired too high this time—but the boat, where is she? That shot may draw the patrol. Hush that woman's screams, if you have to choke her to death."

Shriek after shriek, three loud piercing cries, broke from the lips of Oreana, before they could muffle her mouth, and even as this was done, while Champe held her, struggling in his arms, there was heard a rush of coming feet.

The next instant a man bounded to the spot. Champe got one glimpse as he sprang upon him.

"It is Carroll," he screamed, and then a blow upon his head laid him senseless on the spot. He did not hear the fierce shout of another who rushed on, nor hear Blinks cry:

"There are but two—down with them!"

There were but two, Edward Carroll and the Indian, and the pirates turned to meet them, with ready hands and weapons, while the sound of oars on the water told them their expected boat was near.

"Down with 'em, quick, for the boat is here," said Blinks,

faintly, for he bled fearfully from the scalp wound just received. "Into the boat with the woman—let Champe slide, I'll have her to myself."

Ah, more men are coming, even as the boat speeds on to answer the pirates' call—more men from the other way!

"Help—in the name of Heaven, help!" shouted Carroll, as he was hurled back from her side.

"Help is here. Down devils, down—help is here," shouted a manly voice.

It was Wrestling Joe, Fred Bellows, following close behind, Gilroy and Pepito, too.

Blinks did not wait to see how many, for the boat was now close at hand—he heard the shouts of more men coming, and he reeled into the boat as it touched the pier.

"Pitch the woman in, and shove off," he shouted.

But the lady had a strong arm around her form now—a half-dozen pirates fell from pistol-shots and flashing knife.

The pirates were overmatched, and dragging their wounded into the boat, Champe among the rest, they shoved off, just as a large crowd of men came rushing down toward the pier.

"Caramba. The Vigilantes," cried Joaquin, whom our readers have probably recognized in the person of the disguised Indian. "Come, amigo, or you are in their hands again."

And literally dragging Carroll away from the crowd, the disguised bandit hurried off just in time to avoid the men who came rushing down.

"Saved—saved!" cried La Belle Oreana, hysterically, and then her overwrought energies all gave way, and she fainted.

"Fred, do you see her borne safely back to her residence," said Joe, to his friend. "I must hold myself apart from her, though she is more than life to me."

As Wrestling Joe fell back out of sight, when the lady recovered, she only recognized Gilroy and Bellows among all who surrounded her.

"Where are they" she asked, in a whisper, of Gilroy. "I surely heard the voices of Mr. Carroll and of Mr. Caruthers."

"Both were here, both aided in your rescue, and both are safe now, though not present," replied the manager, in the same low tone.

"Thank Heaven for that! Let me be taken back to my poor boy as soon as possible. This has been a fearful adventure."

"It has, indeed. Had not Mr. Caruthers, impelled by a dread of danger to you, gone with us to your lodging, and heard the report of your servant, who was badly hurt as well as bound, the villains would have got off with you, I fear. Mr. Carroll and the Indian were overmatched when we got there."

"That Indian was the great Joaquin."

"Heavens! and the Vigilantes were almost here when he and Carroll moved away. Be silent, for if the patrol hear what you know, they'll hunt them down before they can get away."

The lady said no more, but now able to walk, accepted the escort of Gilroy and the young actor, while the Vigilantes followed as a guard, to see her safe to her lodgings.

CHAPTER XLI.

A DASHING RIDE IN VIEW.

When Joaquin drew Carroll swiftly away from the danger that approached in the shape of the patrol—a danger alike imminent to both, he ran with him up a narrow street, which, without lights, made their retreat secure. He did not pause until they were out of hearing of the party they had left, and then when he stopped, still holding Carroll by the hand, he said:

"We are followed, but there is only one after us—close, too."

"And he is a friend," said a voice, which both recognized.

It was Pepito, who had rushed away, he scarcely knew why, supposing that Joe was coming also—or so, at least, he now explained.

"Mr. Caruthers will not come where I am," said Carroll, when he saw who it was that spoke. "He is most likely

with the lady. Go, my good little man—go and see that she is safe."

"And you, senor, and the brave Joaquin—what will become of you?"

"In an hour we shall be on our way to the mountains. Should new perils require aid from us, I am to be found—but will you keep the secret, if I tell you?"

"I will swear it, senor, on the holy cross."

"Then Don Eduardo and I can be found on the highest peak of the Contra Costa range east, as true as a bird could fly from the towers of Santa Clara. Will you remember?"

"I will, senor—I will."

"Then return and see that the lady reaches her lodging safely. Tell Mr. Gilroy I am safe and will not incur new danger, if it can be avoided. Take this purse—"

"No, senor—no, it is an honor to serve you, without gold."

The dwarf vanished, and Joaquin, with Carroll, hurried on, rejoicing that Champe had been so well deceived in his Indian ally.

The band of Joaquin, kept awake and ready for action by the faithful Francisco, were rejoiced when their brave leader arrived, for his prolonged absence had excited their fears for his safety.

"Away ten of you to the ranch, and bring in all the horses, saddled and ready. Saddle my large bay stallion for Don Eduardo, and for me bring the gray courser," said Joaquin, as soon as he glanced over the assembled men and marked that all were present.

The ten hurried forth, while those who remained looked to their arms and prepared for the dashing ride they soon would take.

CHAPTER XLII.

MORE PLOTTING AND PLANNING.

Night came, and there was but one place in all the theater where another person could have found a seat, or standing room. That was in the close-curtained private box which Joe, by special contract, had reserved for Maggie and Pepito.

Eagerly Maggie and Pepito peered out into that crowd from behind the curtains, to see if they could again discover the presence of enemies to those whom they loved. For they knew, if not badly hurt, the wretch Champe, and the villain who had linked fortunes with him, would most likely yet strive to keep in the presence of those they hated, yet keep on planning to get them in their power.

"Can you see any one?" asked Maggie of her companion. "Can you see any one like Champe, or that other bad man whom we saw disguised as a Chinaman?"

"Yes—both are here, and close, very close to the front again. This time they wear the dress of miners. The slouch hats are over their eyes, they are so close in front no one will make them take them off. If they did, both have wigs, of coarse, shaggy hair, clear over their brows. I know them by their eyes."

"Yes—I see them now," said Maggie. "What shall we do? Can we not give the alarm, and have them arrested?"

"No—I will follow them when they go from here, and try to learn their plans. Wrestler Joe has hired a guard to come and go with the lady. She does not know it, but now she is protected, all the time, by his care."

"Oh, how he must love her. And she cannot love him, for she never meets him," said Maggie, with a sigh. "Oh, would that he loved me, and I were worthy of his love!"

"Girl Maggie, were he an emperor, you are more than worthy of his love—but hush—the curtain rises."

The night passed on, as usual, and when the curtain fell it was on an audience more than usually delighted.

When the two men who had been closely watched by Maggie and Pepito rose to leave with the crowd, they glanced all around to see if any one they knew was watching them, and did not see one on whom suspicion rested. Pepito, rolled up in a brown mantle, though close behind them as they moved on, was unobserved.

From the theater to a low den, where sailors, roughs of every kind and character, men and vagabonds of every

clime were represented—a flat building with a lot of eating-stalls arranged along one side, a bar on the other, and bunks in tiers in the rear, the dwarf followed the two villains in their well-chosen disguise. He dared not follow them into the house, for he knew that he would be recognized, and that would be the end of him.

Peering in at the door, he saw them speak to the proprietor of the place, as if to give an order, and then retire into the rearmost stall along the line, and drop the curtains.

Quickly he crept around the building; it was literally but a shanty, and in a few seconds he stood not only where he could hear them, low as they were speaking, but see them through a crack wide enough to have put his finger through while he in the darkness was in no danger of being discovered, for he was twenty yards back from the unlighted street.

"What do you think of our chance now?" asked Champe of his companion, after the landlord had brought a bottle and glasses, and left them according to order.

"Good. They are better now than ever," said Blinks. "The man Carroll, whom it does seem impossible to kill, is now off with Joaquin to a certainty. And the blame of this affair has all gone on Joaquin you see. We are not known in it."

"That is true. But I'm sorry I didn't do for Carroll, myself. I thought that cursed Indian was true grit, and all right. He either merely wounded Carroll slightly, or he played me a trick."

"The last most likely—in fact, it goes ahead of my knowledge-box. But now for our work. We must plan speedily and act on our plans. I can't keep my crew quiet in port much longer."

"Well, my plan is to raise a bloody row in the theater—have all your crew there in different disguises, but with some mark to know each other, you understand. We can get the tickets in a lump—let us see, for the benefit night of Oreana—and when all is confusion dash for the stage, dressing-room, and that private box, and bag all our game."

"Good! The plan will work—I'm sure it will. The only thing will be to keep my men controlled, after it begins. Naturally there will be a crowd. And he who buys two hundred tickets to speculate upon for a benefit night attracts no attention. Let's see—the benefit is on Friday night, and that is—"

"The fourteenth of March," gasped Champe, turning white.

But he dashed a glass of brandy down his throat, and with a laugh, cried:

"I don't care. Carroll isn't here, and dare not come. He is with Joaquin, a hundred miles away. They went toward the Contra Costa range, and are now back of San Jose. We'll do the job on Friday night, and then when that woman is humbled to the dust—the dwarf swung like an ape below your cross-trees, the girl Mag the plaything of your whole crew—or dead, and worse than dead, and Joe swinging at your yard-arm—then will I be satisfied, as far as they go. That done, we'll go for Joaquin, his treasure, his head, and Ned Carroll, too."

"Good—'tis settled. Friday night the job shall be done."

"Heavens!" gasped the dwarf, "what can be done? Carroll a hundred miles away, and two hundred men, armed and desperate, to work against us—us alone. For who will fight, risk life, shed blood, or care for us. God of the just, what can be done! Carroll a hundred miles away, and with men who could thwart all this fiendish plot, if they were here."

The dwarf staggered back. He placed his hand upon his brow, as if a fever burned there. He seemed to reel beneath a load of thought.

At last he muttered:

"I can do it—I will do it—or I'll die. Carroll is a hundred miles away."

He turned and fled away through the darkness with a speed one would not think possible from such a form.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"AID US, OR WE PERISH!"

When Pepito reached the rooms of Wrestling Joe, he found the latter arming and getting ready to go in search of him—Gilroy and Bellows in company; for the wrestler knew how bitterly Champe hated the poor dwarf, and what would be the fate of the latter, if the gambler could lay hands upon him, or even get him within a weapon's reach. And Maggie had told them whither he had gone.

Pepito was so much out of breath that he could not answer the questions which were literally showered upon him by Joe, Maggie, and Gilroy, for he had run at his utmost speed from the spot where he left the plotters.

And when he could speak, the first thing he said was:

"Horses—money—I must have both, for Carroll is one hundred miles away."

"He has gone crazy," said Joe, softly. "He has lost his mind."

"No, no—but give me money. I must buy horses—Carroll is a hundred miles away," almost screamed the dwarf.

"I must see him quick—he must be here on the fourteenth day of March—in two days! and he is a hundred miles away."

The last words ended in an agonizing moan, and then he cried:

"Money—money, for Heaven's sake, and let me go."

Tears were streaming from his eyes—he quivered from head to foot, and looked piteously from one to the other.

"Poor Pepito, explain what you mean. You have seen or heard something terrible, I know; they think you are crazy, but I know you are not."

It was Maggie who spoke, and she laid her hand gently on the shoulder of the dwarf, and looked down kindly in his face.

"Yes, yes, girl Maggie, you are right. I heard it all—their plans. They are to land two hundred butchering pirates, and to take La Belle Oreana, and you, and Joe, and me, and carry us on board the brig to die. Yes, worse than that for you and her. Oh, let me go now to find Carroll; he is with Joaquin, one hundred miles away!"

The wrestler now began to comprehend what the dwarf meant. By a few kind, apt questions, he drew out the whole story, and also the plan the dwarf had formed to let Carroll know of the plot and draw the great Joaquin and his daring band there to meet and thwart the pirates.

"It is the best chance of all—in fact, the only thing in which I could feel faith," said Joe. "But if Carroll is so far away, how can he be reached?"

"He is one hundred miles away. I am light and can ride like a monkey on the wild horses of this country. I did it in the hills for fun. Six or seven hours as fast as I can go; when one horse runs to death I'll buy another, and I'll get there, and he can come in time. Only let me try—I'll die or do it."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Upon a mountain peak due east from Santa Clara towers. Joaquin told me so himself. I will ride night and day until I reach it. Give me money, and let me go."

"You shall have it, Pepito, and we will get two good horses and see you start. I have a friend who keeps racing stock, and I can get the best he has. Maggie, bring the bag of doubloons that is beneath my pillow. Come, Fred, we will leave Gilroy here with Maggie—you shall go with me to start Pepito—it is our surest plan to thwart these fiends."

Pepito's face was radiant now. Maggie brought the money, his cloak and belt, with his pistols and his dagger.

"Spurs—spurs—I must have spurs," he said. "I will ride like a cloud before the wild, wild wind. Haste, good Wrestler Joe, for I am ready."

Joe was also ready in a moment more, he only paused to arrange the money necessary to be carried in pouches so that the dwarf might not lose it; then he penned a single line to Joaquin.

"We, who buried your lost love, are now in fearful peril; aid us, or we perish."

"Give this to Joaquin. For the other, I have no message—he will need none when he hears that she is in peril."

Then the trio—Pepito, Joe, and Fred—hurried out to get horses from his friend, for he knew if two were taken and ran side by side, the one to be changed as the other tired, the pace kept up might be very great, as well as lasting.

They were soon at the stables, the horses picked out, wiry mustangs, light and fleet, saddled and made ready.

The dwarf received a heavy whip and clambered to the saddle with an agility more resembling a monkey than a man. The next second, with a wild screech—"Carroll is a hundred miles away"—he dashed off in the darkness with his horses at full speed.

An instant, the fire could be seen as hoofs struck flinty stone—then he was gone—gone like a demon on the wings of night. Gone with his elfin cry startling the rancheros as he passed:

"Carroll is one hundred miles away."

CHAPTER XLIV.

PEPITO'S MAD RIDE.

Carroll, treated as an honored guest by Joaquin in his "Eagle's Nest," his eyrie in the clouds, charmed by such views of ocean, lake, and stream, of mountain and plain, as he had never seen before in all his life, seemed almost under a magic spell for a little time. There was a romance in life among those lawless men, who did not ask that he should share their lawless deeds, but left him to his pleasures and his thoughts, serving him as if it was an honor to do it, and he almost forgot the scenes from which he had fled, the one for whose protection he had run every risk before—the lady who was periled even more than he dreamed.

It was noon, and beneath the shade of a great pine the chieftain of the band sat talking with his guest.

"I must not let my men rest too long," he said. "If I do, even as their blades will rust, so will their spirit lose its fire. For me—I need no rest. My nature never wearies. The burning thirst for vengeance ever keeps me strong and eager for more work. I could live better, ay, sleep sounder amid the din of constant battle, than here where only the shrieking winds make music to my ears. Ah—there is work—work for me and mine, if my eyes deceive me not. A horseman is speeding up the trail—I wonder we had not seen him sooner. He comes like a cloud—at a fearful rate for a trail like that."

The bandit chief pointed down the mountain side where the narrow trail wound along the verge of frightful cliffs, and Carroll saw with wonder a horse at full gallop pressing up the perilous path.

Seen by his sentinels, the alarm was given that a scout was coming in, or else a stranger was in sight, and every man was quickly on the watch.

Nearer and nearer, but slower as he came, the horseman made his way. His steed was not equal to a road so steep and rough at a speed which must have taxed all its powers. "Ride down and meet him—if his mission be as urgent as his speed indicates, the sooner we have heard it the better," said Joaquin.

A dozen men mounted on horses trained to skim the hills dashed at full speed down the trail. They met the rider, whose horse had almost given out, a few words seemed to pass, and the rider, now seeming to be only a boy, was taken on one of the fresh horses, and it with the others dashed back to their chief as swiftly as they went.

"Heavens! it is Pepito. Why have I lingered here?" cried Carroll, as he recognized the dwarf. "She is in deadly peril, else he would not be here. Why—why did I, coward-like, leave my post?"

The dwarf, himself almost worn down, gasped out, as he reached the spot where Joaquin and Carroll stood:

"Carroll was a hundred miles away, but I have found him."

Then he fell fainting to the ground.

Wine was brought and poured between his lips. Water cold from the mountain springs was used to bathe his brow and bring him to his senses, that he might tell his errand.

Revived with stimulants, the dwarf opened his eyes on Carroll, and as the latter questioned, made reply until he

understood it all, the plot, the peril, and the hope of help which had made the brave dwarf ride fully a hundred miles in half a night and half a day, over a country which to some would seem in many parts impassable.

"Brave—brave Pepito," said Carroll. "You are worth a hundred men of kingly stature in the heart you bear in your bosom. You have not come for me in vain. There is time for me to reach the theater before the hour they plan to carry out their plot."

"Time for us all. There shall be no need of help," said Joaquin, who had just perused the line Joe had sent to him, when he, too, understood what the dwarf had come to tell, and what he had come to ask. It is but one hundred miles and we have a dozen hours to spare. Alone upon my horse in half the time we have, I could be there. We will prepare, and then let the pirate be taught a lesson. Joaquin told him to stay upon the waters which were his own."

All was life now in the bandit camp. The best horses were made ready, weapons belted on, and men marshaled for a rapid ride.

Pepito, nursed and rubbed and stimulated, felt so much revived that he begged he should not be left behind, and would not rest till Carroll promised, if he had to be bound upon the horse he rode, he should keep with the party till they reached the city.

Carroll had laughed wildly when the date came to his mind, and that the villain Champe glorying in an absence which he supposed was sure, had no fear for the day of doom, which had been rung in his ears so often.

"The fourteenth day of March will dawn for him, but he will not live to hear the bell which tolls to tell its ending," said he. "He and the pirate have plotted well as to the day and hour. It most assures me of our success, for I feel that for him it is the final hour—perhaps it is for me."

"We will not wait too long," said Joaquin. "By another and a better route than that Pepito traveled over, we will ride to the city, and enter it at dark. Our haste will not be such as to wear down our horses, for at one-half the distance we will find fresh horses at a ranch where friends of ours are ready to serve us in our need."

The sun was yet above the coast range when Joaquin and his men, with Carroll and the dwarf, left the mountain camp to ride to San Francisco.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE FOURTEENTH OF MARCH.

Benefit night. And the benefit, too, of the city's sudden favorite. For she had taken her audiences by storm there, as she had done at her *debut* in the upper mines. The house was full—full to overflowing. The wealth, the fashion, so far as fashion went in the new city, the influence of the town was there.

The managers who were to share one-half of the house, were in ecstasy. Never had it been so crowded before. The house trembled with the weight of noise, as the murmuring crowd impatiently waited for the curtain to come up.

The curtain rose. The manager came out smiling. His face was radiant. La Belle Oreana would sing the *Marsellaise* in French.

Cheer on cheer arose, and the thunders of applause were deafening when she came out.

The tri-colored scarf floated over her lovely shoulders—never—never had she seemed so beautiful as then.

She smiled, bowed, and the audience was still. Her voice rose in the thrilling song, until it filled the air and every heart as well. It was done, and the audience seemed wilder than before—again, and twice was she brought out to sing the song, while gold flew in showers at her feet.

Even the demon Champe felt the power of her voice, and as he gloated over the beauty, which seemed more than human, he rejoiced in the thought that he—he would possess her.

Blinks was by his side, his men so mixed in among the crowd that none noticed a similarity of dress, but yet

near enough together to unite speedily when the moment to act in unison came.

"Is it time?" whispered Blinks to Champe, when Oreana retired. "Is it time for me to give the signal?"

"No—no," said Champe, nervously—"let us wait until Wrestling Joe and Fred Bellows have come out. The longer we delay the better. The people will break out of our way the easier, and quicker, when well surfeited with the entertainment. There—there they come."

Joe and his comrade appeared as the Wrestlers of Olympus. It was one of their most graceful scenes, one in which their statue-like figures as well as their graceful postures were made most conspicuous. Their reception was enthusiastic to "immensity," critically speaking.

"Is it now time?" asked Blinks, impatiently, as they retired.

"No—no—I don't see why, but somehow I dread to spring the trap," said Champe. "Things look strange in the private box. That Joe looks strangely bold and confident. And I saw a pair of eyes just now glancing from a side wing on the stage that went like fire into me. I don't know what is the matter—I wish it was any other day than this. For it is the fourteenth day of March."

"Bah! What is one day more than another, Champe? Don't be a coward now. Remember what we have to back us."

"I do—I do. Since Carroll is not here, I will nerve up. I wish I had one good, bracing drink."

"Well—go out with me and get one. Then we'll come back and make our game."

When Champe and Blinks went out, though they knew it not, two men, who held both their lives in their hands, went like their shadows near them. These men were at the door, and on the breast of each there was a flower—worn as if for ornament, but the flowers both were red, and worn, in the same way, on their breasts.

And had they thought to look around they might have seen twenty more at least, standing idly near the door, who wore red flowers where these two men did.

They went to the bar of the saloon and drank full glasses of the strongest brandy twice, and then Champe said he was ready.

As he passed the threshold of the theater to enter, he heard a strange, hollow voice whisper in his ear:

"The fourteenth of March has come."

He started as if stung by an adder, and turned to see who was near. Blinks had passed on—he stood alone.

"Coward that I am, I imagined it," he muttered, and he hurried to his seat.

"Are your men ready?" he asked of Blinks, as he gained his side.

"Ay—when I sound my whistle they will leap upon the stage and to the private box. Then—it may be a shot, or a blow or two at most, and they are ours. In twenty minutes more we are in our boats—then to the brig, to sea, and all—all is over."

"Good! Good! That brandy warms me for the job. We may as well begin—but wait till Oreana comes again, for I want her seized where I can see it done, or better yet, do that job myself," said Champe, huskily. "Ha! Who whispered then? Did you, Blinks, did you?"

Those fearful words to him had reached his ears again:

"The fourteenth day of March has come."

"I did not speak," said Blinks. "Be a man! You are whiter than a sheet. Cheer up—I will give the signal when the curtain goes up for her. You are getting so nervous that I dare not wait longer, though it does not seem as if it was time yet."

"Time—time for what?" gasped Champe, trembling from head to foot.

"You know well, you nervous fool! You know for what I have landed my crew—for what I run the risk of being trapped on shore by the accursed Vigilantes. That queenly woman, yonder lovely girl, and revenge, sweet revenge. Look in the private box. There is the dwarf you hate, the girl so well disguised. What the duse ails you, Champe?"

"I know not, Blinks, I know not. I choke with a strange terror. I freeze with a chill for which I cannot account—that does not seem to be Pepito, the dwarf, in the private box. It looks to me like a demon come to drag me down to doom. See how his red eyes glare like balls

of fire. The girl—so white—ah, it is not her! It is an accusing spirit sent to summon me before the judgment."

"Fool—fool—hush, you are already attracting attention by your white face, your nervous whisperings."

"I can't help it, Blinks, I can't help it. Let us go out and get some more drink. I am as weak as an infant."

"Bah—we must not delay! My men are ready. Their eyes have marked the wreath in jewels on many a form here. They are ripe for work. They are anxious for my signal. I will give it when the singer comes on the stage, for then every eye will be upon her. Nerve yourself for the work. You are to rush upon the woman; I have men assigned for work in the private box; all is well understood and ready. If each man does his part we will succeed in every point, and be off on board the brig before the alarm has reached a square from the theater. Come—come now! Are you ready?"

"In Satan's name, yes. Let the crisis come!"

And the huge gambler strove to steady every nerve and to gather in at a glance the position of all around him.

Tinkle went the bell, the orchestra gave a grand, loud burst of music, the curtain rose, and, stepping forward with all the dignity of an empress, La Belle Oreana came.

Her face was wreathed in smiles, her dark eyes shone with resplendent fire, just enough of the color of excitement flushed her face to make each feature glow with a richer tone—her noble form seemed to rise and expand in new beauty.

"There is not her match on earth. She is the queen of all beauty," whispered Blinks.

Had he spoken aloud no word of his could have been heard, for now the theater was trembling with the cheers of the multitude as they welcomed their favorite.

"The signal—the signal," gasped Champe. "My heart is all aflame. The signal, Blinks—the signal."

"Wait till she sings—wait till she sings!" said the pirate, himself trembling with excitement. "She is worth risking a thousand lives for. But I must hear her sing once more."

The cheers at last were hushed, and hands and feet had rest. All was now so still, that had a pin dropped its noise could have been heard.

Her voice, never before more sweet or thrilling, rose in ever sweeter notes than usual, and as if one heart, one pulse, alone could feel, the entire audience listened with tremulous attention.

Champe and Blinks seemed as much entranced as any there. Oh, could they break in upon this flood of harmony, change the scene to one of sudden fear and discord!

Some men are fiends by nature. No scene is too holy for them to mar its purity with desecrating hand, or fiendish will.

Yet Blinks did hesitate. It was not until the song was finished and the theater again shook with the thunder of applause that he nerved himself for work.

Not until recalled the lady, glorious in her beauty and her pleased confusion, came out to repeat the song.

Then, while Champe, again vacillating, besought him to go out for another drink, the pirate nerved himself to give the signal. He felt that it must be given then or never. For the cowardice of Champe was telling on his own nerves.

When the audience was still, waiting for her first note in the encore, Blinks drew a silver whistle from his bosom and blew a startling call.

As he did so he rose, and, followed by Champe, sprang toward the stage, while from all parts of the theater armed men, responding to the call, tore watches and jewels from those around them, and as they did this, shouting out a fearful war-cry.

"Skull and cross-bones! Blood or treasure!" they uttered in a body to follow the lead of the two, who by this time were on the stage.

Where now was Oreana? Recognizing Champe by his fiery eyes as well as his hoarse shout of triumph, it would seem that any woman so imperiled would turn to fly.

But with a face glorious in its indignant beauty, all defiant in its looks, she drew from her bosom the gift of Wrestling Joe, the silver-mounted revolver, and as the gambler rushed with outstretched arms toward her raised its barrel full in his fiendish face and fired.

But it seemed as if fate would befriend him even then, for he stumbled over the form of Pepito, who had leaped from the private box upon the stage, and the ball, missing his head, wounded a pirate who was close behind him.

Recovering before she could again use the weapon the gambler clasped the lady in his brawny arms and shouted to Blinks, who saw Maggie in the hands of another of his followers:

"I have her now! Out by the back way with your men. We can reach the boats and be off before any rally can be made to check our course!"

"Dastard! Hands off from that form!"

It was Wrestling Joe who sprang from behind the scene, and striking Champe in his brutal face, staggered him away from her whom the wrestler tore from his foul embrace.

"Devil! I'll fix you! She shall be mine!" cried the gambler, and raising a revolver he fired at Joe. But even with the flash a form sprang between the gambler and the wrestler's body, and a wild shriek broke from Maggie's lips, for the bullet intended for him had passed through her body.

"Saved—saved—he is saved!" she murmured, as she sank to the floor.

"Help me! away with her!" cried Champe, once more bounding toward Oreana, for now Wrestling Joe was stricken down by a blow from another of the pirates, and the lady was reeling toward the side-scenes.

"Ay, away—away all hands!" cried Blinks, and both he and Champe sprang toward her.

"Halt! Your time has come! It is the fourteenth day of March!"

Henry Champe uttered a despairing yell, for now Eduardo Carroll, his blue eyes flashing an unearthly glare, rushed forward, and with giant strength hurled him to the floor.

"Blinks—help! help!" yelled Champe. "Kill him or all is lost!"

But too quickly did the pirate respond to the cry of his mate in villainy, and with an unerring aim he fired on the man whose foot was now planted on the prostrate form of the gambler.

Carroll staggered—he knew the deadly bullet had pierced his breast, but with a ghastly smile he looked down on Champe and said:

"Die—wretch—it is but too much honor that you die thus!"

Even while the words were leaving his lips he bent over and drove his broad-bladed knife to the hilt in the ruffian's breast.

Blinks had not a chance to turn and fly as he now intended to do. The dwarf, with a cry of hate and anger, clung to his legs, and as the pirate strove to tear away he tripped and fell closely by the side of poor dying Maggie.

"Let me go, you devil—let me go!" he shouted, as Pepito clutched him in his long, bony arms.

And he struck the dwarf repeatedly with the dagger in his hand.

Howling with mingled pain and rage the dwarf set his teeth in the pirate's throat, and while the latter struck wildly with his blood-stained weapon the dwarf literally tore his neck asunder like a ravenous beast of prey.

"Help! help! Crew of the Malek Adhel!" he cried, in a gasping shriek, and he tore himself loose from the dwarf, whom he felled with a blow which crushed through his head even into the brain.

"Joaquin is here! Death to every pirate! Spare not a one!" came now in a tone which made all tremble, and tearing in from front and rear, a band of dark, fierce men who struck down with long, keen knives every person who wore a seaman's garb, or carried a weapon in his hand.

Already was the theater emptied of all but the combatants. The audience had got away—many robbed, some hurt—but it was broken up and gone.

The rush of Joaquin and his men ended all. A part of the pirates fell, the rest fled, scattering where they could, and in less time than it takes to write it out the theater was almost empty.

Upon the stage alone there was a closing scene, such as had never been pictured there before.

A scene from which we fain would turn, but this work were left unfinished if we did so.

Maggie, dying with a smile upon her face, and a blessing on her lips, a blessing upon him whom she had saved—while Pepito, who had received his death-wound from Blinks, who was also down to rise no more, crept to die close beside her.

Carroll, leaning upon the shoulder of Joaquin, with the red blood gushing from his breast, called to the lady, who stood in speechless agony, holding her boy by the hand, gazing on his white face, while Caruthers, raised by Bel-lows, stood but a few steps distant—wounded, but not badly hurt.

"Ione—come here with him. You will be free now, and he should know all!" said Carroll, in a low tone, for the faintness of death was falling fast upon him. "Come—Ione—my wife, come!"

"His wife?" The mother of my boy his wife!" cried Caruthers as he started forward toward the dying man, a look of hate upon his face. "Ione—Ione—is not this, at least, a hideous lie?"

"Caruthers—this is no hour to blame her, the truest, purest, noblest of her sex. Be calm, and hear the story of a dying man, of one who leaves to you a treasure that is priceless! Come close to me, Ione—we are about to part forever."

She drew up close to his side, clinging to her child, while Joe also advanced to hear what he had to say, what could be said to lighten up this strange mystery.

"Caruthers," said Carroll—his voice was very low but firm—"you heard me call her wife. Years ago, when she was but a child in age, by her father's wish she became my bride. I do not think she ever loved me, but she was good and true, I know, while yet she thought me living. When the war with Mexico broke out I sought to serve my country. At Buena Vista I fell, with wounds supposed to be mortal, among a heap of dead and dying. After the battle was over I was dragged from amid the gory heaps, not by a friendly hand, but by Mexicans, who only nursed me into life to make me suffer in the darkest dungeons of Perote. For years I was thus held, while she, free as she supposed, was met by you and wooed and won.

"When I escaped at last from long duress, and she learned that I was living, she fled from you, as if she felt she had done you a deadly wrong. She would not return to me. But she vowed that while I lived she would remain apart from both. You know how truly hath her vow been kept. But now—now the end has come—I—I am going fast. Take her, love her as she nobly deserves, and with her take the blessing of one who gives it freely. There is—property—it is hers and yours—in that package find records, deeds, and will!"

The last act of Carroll was to draw a package from his bosom, and while Caruthers and Ione both grasped his hands, and breathed kind words, he smiled and died.

Joaquin gently laid the body down, and without a word turned away. His men at a signal followed.

Joe now turned with Ione to look on poor Maggie. Her agony was over. She could not see the joy which would have been pain to her, for she had loved him, even though he loved not her.

The poor dwarf lay dead beside her. His troubles, too, were over.

"Ione, with our boy Indice, let us leave this land forever! Ours has been a strange experience in it!" said the Wrestler, as he turned from the scene so dark and mournful.

"We will, when the last sad rites are over, which give honorable burial to those who have been true to us! All that I now ask are peace and quietude, that we may strive to forget the darkness and the sorrows we have passed through."

Reader. I cannot add to the picture. The story is at an
[END.]

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